

### Figurations of displacement in and beyond Ethiopia: empirical findings and reflections on protracted displacement and translocal connections of Eritreans in Ethiopia

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# TRAF'G

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

## Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Ethiopia

Empirical findings and reflections on  
protracted displacement and translocal  
connections of Eritreans in Ethiopia

F. A. Tufa, M. Rudolf, M. G. Abebe,  
D. Amsalu, B. Etzold, T. A. Mengiste

## SUMMARY

This *working paper* is based on empirical research on translocal figurations of displacement in Ethiopia. It explores TRAFIG's central question: "How are protractedness, dependency and vulnerability related to the factors of local and translocal connectivity and mobility, and, in turn, how can connectivity and mobility be utilised to enhance the self-reliance and strengthen the resilience of displaced people?" The *paper* presents findings from six camps in Tigray and Afar regional states, as well as urban refugees in Addis Ababa and several cities in Tigray.

The findings show that the capability to break free from protracted displacement is primarily determined by each refugee's networks and connectivity. Local and translocal connectivity enable refugees to move out of camps, secure livelihoods, widen future chances and process their onward mobility. In the cities or in other countries in which displaced people temporarily or permanently settle, network contacts provide information about job opportunities, support local integration, help to access business licenses informally and to cover costs of living. The extent of support provided through networks, however, depends on the quality of translocal/national social relations. Particularly, such connections that could avail of financial resources determine the pathways of refugees' mobility.

For those who have strong networks, camps are just a transit space where they process their onward mobility. Those who do not have strong networks are more susceptible to experiencing protracted waiting periods, diminished livelihood options and general vulnerability. Our study reveals that context is vital for mobility and translocal connectivity: Both dimensions need to be put in the context of previous histories of migration, bonds and alliances with the hosting communities, and the state of current political affairs. Against this backdrop, the study reveals significant differences between the three groups of Eritrean refugees we studied (Tigrinya, Afar and Kunama) in terms of their connectivity, mobility and vulnerability.

## KEYWORDS

Protracted displacement, Eritrean refugees, urban refugees, Out-of-camp-policy, refugee–host community relationships, connectivity, mobility, local integration, Tigrinya, Tigray, Afar, Kunama, Ethiopia

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# Introduction

While the international community was arguing about the extent of ongoing armed clashes and the scope of the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, some refugees went back on foot to the country they had escaped from years ago—Eritrea. They did not go back because they wanted to or because anything had improved there. On the contrary, but with armed skirmishes closing in on them, they saw no other way to save their lives. For years, they had been stuck in camps close to the border without their hopes materialising, durable solutions in sight or at least a life in dignity guaranteed.

As part of the project “Transnational Figurations of Displacement” (TRAFIG), funded by the European Union and coordinated by BICC, this *working paper* addresses the question of how protractedness, dependency and vulnerability relate to the factors of local and translocal connectivity and mobility. It also discusses how connectivity and mobility could be utilised to enhance self-reliance and strengthen the resilience of displaced people. The TRAFIG project investigates protracted displacement situations from the conceptual perspective of transnational figurations of displacement to highlight the processual nature of social relations and networks.<sup>1</sup> A figuration refers to social networks of interdependent human beings whose interactions and dependency relations significantly shape their lives. To focus on figurations makes it possible to dissect the dialectic relation between structure and agency—both the rigidity of systems and the capacities of individuals to change them. To depart from the concept of transnationalism enables us to stress social, cultural, economic and political flows and to highlight relations across the borders of nation-states (cf. Etzold et al., 2019).

## Mobility strategies

Our empirical evidence from interviews, focus group discussions and participative observations confirm how Eritrean refugees resort to creative and highly diverse strategies to cope as much as possible with the insecurity and loss of livelihoods. To widen the opportunities to end their protracted and often very precarious situation, they use old networks and create new

connections across multiple spaces. These are based on past and present, personal and indirect relations. The connections include members of the community of origin, host communities and relations formed with other persons in transit. To test our hypothesis that mobility and connectivity are related to resilience and self-reliance in situations of protracted displacement, this working paper examines the case of forced migration from Eritrea to Ethiopia.

Eritrea has been in the top ten list of source countries for cross-border displacements throughout the last decade. In 2019, over half a million refugees came from the six million population country (UNHCR, 2020, p. 20). With 12,500 per 100,000 inhabitants, Eritrea is the third-largest source of refugees worldwide after Syria and South Sudan in relative terms (UNHCR, 2020, p. 26). Due to decades of forced displacement, the Eritrean diaspora today can be found in North America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia.<sup>2</sup> In the last ten years, 2011 to 2020, Eritreans were the fourth-largest group of migrants from third countries outside the European Union (after Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis) who were detected crossing the European Union's external borders (FRONTEX data 2021).

## Migration trajectories

Worsening living conditions related to numerous periods of armed conflicts and the currently reigning authoritarian regime (cf. Belloni, 2016, p. 3) have triggered most of Eritrean migration. Eritrea became an independent country after the Ethiopian Civil War that ended with the downfall of the military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. It has been ruled with an iron fist by President Isayas Afwerki since then. In the late 1990s, the relationship between the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) deteriorated. Up to 100,000 people died in the Ethiopian–Eritrean war from 1998 to 2000. Since then, Eritrea has experienced an even harsher militarisation and an indefinite extension of the obligatory military service for all citizens above 18. Peace was only agreed formally in 2018.

<sup>1</sup> We define protracted displacement situations (PDS) as prolonged periods during which displaced persons cannot lead a life in permanent dignity in a secure place of choice as part of a durable solution. Protracted refugee situation (PRS) according to UNHCR's widely used definition is one “in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five years or more in a given asylum country” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 11). While this definition that is mainly used for monitoring purposes certainly has statistical and conceptual limitations, it is internationally recognised and thus carries legal-administrative weight. For analytical reasons it is nevertheless more expedient to speak of protracted displacement situations or dynamics that include any type of displacement (regardless of its legal or administrative recognition), smaller populations and a transnational focus.

<sup>2</sup> Before independence, the number of refugees was even higher: “Eritrea has been a major refugee producing country since the 1960s ... [when] the country was torn by war to achieve independence. This conflict produced over a million refugees out of a population of 4 million” (Belloni, 2018, p. 7). The Eritrean diaspora has ever since been far reaching and rather well connected (Belloni, 2016; Black et al., 2000; Hirt, 2015; Treiber, 2017).

For Eritreans seeking to leave the country, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen are the primary destinations. Due to unstable situations in Yemen and Sudan, the relatively secure path to Ethiopia, established with the recent border opening, has become the preferred crossing option since 2018 (see Box 1 on p. 13). Data from December 2020 shows that, across Ethiopia, there are 178,315 Eritrean refugees, which make up 22 per cent of the total 796,437 refugee population in the country (Qalanjo, 2020). Out of these, 96,000 were sheltered mainly in four refugee camps: Shimelba (8,702), Mai Aini (21,682), Adi Harush (32,167) and Hitsats (25,248), which were established between 2004 and 2013 (see Figure 1). 8,424 urban refugees benefit from the Ethiopian government's out-of-camp programme in towns in Tigray. This demographic data might have changed following the recent conflict in Tigray. Media reports state that many refugees have had to leave the camps either due to a lack of provisions, being caught in cross-fire between the fighting forces, by intervening Eritrean forces across the border or by TPLF forces. Around 54,000 Eritrean refugees live in the camps and settlements in Afar. Finally, around 28,000 live in the capital Addis Ababa as out-of-camp refugees (Qalanjo, 2020).

## Structure of the paper

In **Chapter 1**, we start with the empirical design of the study, we will provide some background on the context of data collection in the field and elaborate on limitations and challenges. **Chapter 2** is about the genesis of protracted displacement in Ethiopia. **Chapter 3** dissects the empirical data in line with the five main pillars of TRAFIG: **Section 3.1** deals with governance regimes of aid and asylum, **Section 3.2**. 'living in limbo' deals with the everyday uncertainty connected to the refugee status and looks into the context of their livelihoods. **Section 3.3**. investigates how refugees strategically use networks and connections to cope with mobility constraints connected to the refugee status, while **Section 3.4** scrutinises how the displaced achieve local integration through alliances with the hosting communities. **Section 3.5** presents in detail how the pitfalls of local integration like precarity, exploitation and tensions affect refugees and how their presence in turn impacts hosts and even provides new incentives for development. **Chapter 4** examines cross-cutting issues relating to gender, vulnerability, ethnicity and analyses how the choice of options at the disposal of refugees relates to the type and range of networks they can draw from. The **Conclusion** summarises our findings and underlines the relevance of social and political factors that are not directly related to national and international refugee policy to the everyday life of refugees.

# 1. Empirical design and limitations of the study

The research team conducted field research in the Afar and Tigray region and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital from October 2019 to end of September 2020. The team consisted of local and international researchers who used qualitative and quantitative research methods. This chapter provides an overview of the research context, sites, challenges, methods and the research team's composition.

## 1.1 Research team and location

The Ethiopia research team consisted of two principal researchers: Fekadu Adugna Tufa and Markus Rudolf as well as three senior researchers: Mulu Getachew, Desalegn Amsalu and Tekalign Ayalew. Benjamin Etzold supported the analysis of the survey findings. An additional nine assistants carried out surveys in Addis Ababa, Tigray (Mekelle, Shire, and Mai Aini) and Afar (Aysaita, Loggia, Berhale, Dalol, Bada). Trying our best to assure an unbiased and emic approach<sup>3</sup> and establish an atmosphere of confidence and familiarity, these survey assistants were selected from among the refugee communities, except some hosts who worked in the humanitarian sector in Aysaita. A dozen of assistants were selected along criteria such as their language and organisational skills, familiarity with the field, networks, mobility and access (these criteria partly excluded women) and their estimated trustworthiness and objectivity in the respondents' eyes.

The advantage of picking assistants from the target group was that they were part of the camp and out-of-camp life: It was easier for them to mobilise survey participants, they had 24-hour access to the field, knew the language—and most importantly—were often able to triangulate information. In Addis Ababa, where we conducted the survey amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, involving the young refugees in conducting the survey was instrumental for its success. Another crucial advantage was that the assistants acted as points of reference for triangulation: Their experiences and observations were themselves important elements of the research, their comments and assessments fed back into the research process, and preliminary results were shaped by continuous discussion within the team.

Eritrea borders two Ethiopian regions which, at the time of research, together hosted six official refugee camps. Four of them were in the Tigray region, two others in the Afar region in north-eastern Ethiopia. Most Eritrean refugees were found in the camps and in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. In phase one, we started fieldwork in October 2019 in Addis Ababa among Eritrean refugees who are beneficiaries of the Ethiopian government's out-of-camp policy (OCP). In Addis Ababa, our fieldwork focused on three localities: Gofa Mebrathayil, Haya-hulet and Bole-Harabssa, neighbourhoods inhabited by many Eritrean refugees. In mid-November 2019, the team members started phase two in Tigray around the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. The team visited all refugee camps populated by Eritrean refugees<sup>4</sup> and conducted over 70 semi-structured interviews, including various life histories, over a dozen expert interviews and six focus group discussions.

The camps in Tigray and Afar region (see Figure 1) differed in size, population and facilities:

- Shimelba camp was established in 2004. At the time of the research, most of the residents had spent more than fifteen years in the camp. The Kunama, a minority ethnic group in Eritrea who are less mobile and less connected, made up 70 per cent of the population of Shimelba camp. They do not have a history of leaving their villages before the war. The camp's population was considered stable (no or little secondary migration). The camp was closed in early February 2021 as it was too close to the border and no longer safe (Gebre, 2021).
- Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps, founded in 2008 and 2010 respectively, are situated in close proximity to each other and next to Mai Tsabri town. They are well-established camps populated mainly by Tigrinya<sup>5</sup> who are mobile and well connected. The camp population is dynamic, and individuals stay from several days up to ten years.

<sup>3</sup> By emic approach we mean an insider's perspective. The core researchers can be categorised as 'outsiders' in terms of their experience of refugee life, though they have always tried to understand the insiders' view, the assistants played an insiders' role as they belong to the same category of refugee.

<sup>4</sup> This research would not have taken this shape without the research permit and official support we secured from the Agency for Refugee and Returnees Affairs (ARRA). We are extremely grateful to ARRA and ARRA officials from head office to refugee camps.

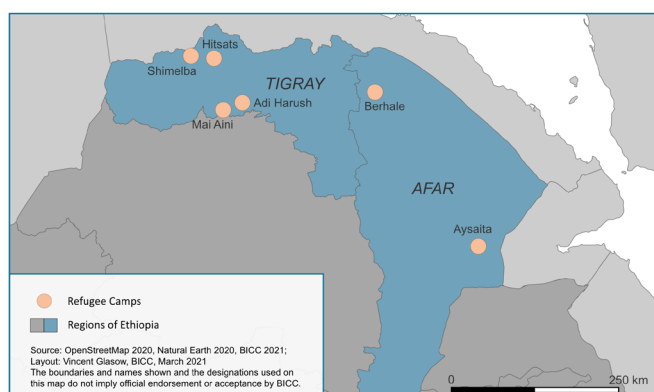
<sup>5</sup> Though the terminology might be confusing, this paper follows the local categorisation: While Tigrinya speakers comprise both Ethiopians and Eritreans, Ethiopians refer to themselves as Tigrayans (people living in Tigray and speaking Tigrinya), while Eritreans are called Tigrinya. The downside of this categorisation is that one term carries two meanings: Tigrinya (speakers) and Tigrinya (group from Eritrea). The upside of this blatant imprecision is that it reflects the general arbitrariness connected to the term. As the precise line of division remains mostly unclear in the practical use of the term, the authors preferred to not opt for an artificially precise distinction. Whenever required, the text will use Ethiopian or Eritrean for clarification.



Hitsats camp, established in 2013 and closed in early February 2021 after reports of attacks,<sup>6</sup> was mainly populated by newcomers at the time of research. Many refugees who arrived following the brief border opening in 2018 and settled in Hitsats were women, children and older people who used the opportunity to leave Eritrea. That changed the camp's demographic characteristics from young, single and male to mixed-age, sex and marital status.

- Aysaita and Berhale are two camps in close proximity to the towns of the same name. They are mostly inhabited by Afar who remain in the camps once they get there. The duration of stay ranges from a few months to years with little dynamic within the camp population. Nevertheless, the camps are working at full capacity and cannot officially accommodate new refugees—unless someone leaves. A large number of refugees lives with local hosting populations and regularly travels to the camps to receive their rations. There are various contacts, cooperations and interactions with the local population.

**Figure 1: Refugee camps in Eritrea**



## 1.2 Sampling and data collection

Taking the qualitative mixed-methods approach developed for the TRAFIG project, the team conducted 44 in-depth narrative interviews, 113 semi-structured interviews and 395 survey interviews, as well as 21 focus group discussions at 20 study sites. The sites were quite diverse, ranging from refugee camps in rural areas to small towns and the urban periphery to larger cities. At each site, participant observations, transect walks and mobile methods complemented our research: We observed life in- and outside camps, participated in daily activities, visited homes, ate local food, went to working places and travelled with—or waited for—local transport.

More than 700 persons participated in our research. In line with the TRAFIG methods handbook, we tried to reach three major sub-groups (displaced persons, network contacts and local com-

munity members) at each site but focussed on displaced people who are (potentially) experiencing protracted displacement. Almost 90 per cent of our respondents were Eritrean refugees; 60 per cent of the respondents were male. The share of respondents living in camps was roughly the same as those living outside of camps (see figure on p. 8). At different sites, we also spoke to members of the local communities affected by protracted displacement, network contacts of refugees and to key stakeholders<sup>7</sup> using semi-structured and biographic interviews. Criteria for the selection of respondents in specific locations included sex, age, family status, educational background (as an indicator of socio-economic status/class), nationality and (where appropriate) ethnicity, legal status at current place of residence, religion, access to support by governments, humanitarian organisations, and finally the factor of translocal and/or transnational connections. It needs mentioning that we—due to a lack of access—had to leave out some of the often most vulnerable individuals, namely those who had been left behind in Eritrea.

When conducting research on and with refugees, certain methodological issues arise that are related to fears and expectations by the refugees. We, therefore, resorted to trust-building, low profile snowball sampling and tried to counter the inbuilt inaccuracies of sampling methods that deal with groups that include hidden populations (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 284), such as unregistered displaced Eritreans in Ethiopia, by using a variety of access points. We defined locations and target groups in a continuous dialogue with the team and local experts. After having identified different points of entry in this way, we picked individual respondents as randomly as possible from each segment. In addition to this classically structured approach, we included a systematic serendipity routine to collect and process information outside the box.<sup>8</sup> Our research, thus, provides representative ideal typical cases without claiming statistical representativeness.

<sup>7</sup> We reached key stakeholders through 34 expert interviews with practitioners at the top level to local staff on the ground, from intergovernmental organisations, governmental institutions, international and national NGOs, to community-based organisations and from consultants and academics to policymakers.

<sup>8</sup> To systematically include serendipity into our research methods meant to allow for coincidences not only to happen but to routinely follow the opportunities opened by them. In contrast to traditional sample methods, which requires the utmost rigidity in adhering to the randomly chosen site, this method allowed us talk to e.g. neighbours if nobody was present at a randomly chosen house. Systematic serendipity as a method, thus, provided additional details about the absent persons and their relations to the host. The idea behind this methodology is to follow the people—but also to allow for people to follow us. When a shepherd passed by, we asked him about live-stock activities; when we encountered people washing their clothes we asked about sanitation, sewage, or we enquired about the property right of the land to dry clothes or the gender / age division of such work. In sum, serendipity was not evaded as usual but systematically sought after. (Rudolf, 2019b).

### 1.3 Fieldwork challenges

The need to follow official, hierarchical procedures consumed a significant amount of all team members' time and energy. Refugee-related matters are almost completely top-down rather than bottom-up processes. Nevertheless, officials, members of the hosting communities and refugees were exceptionally helpful in identifying potential respondents.

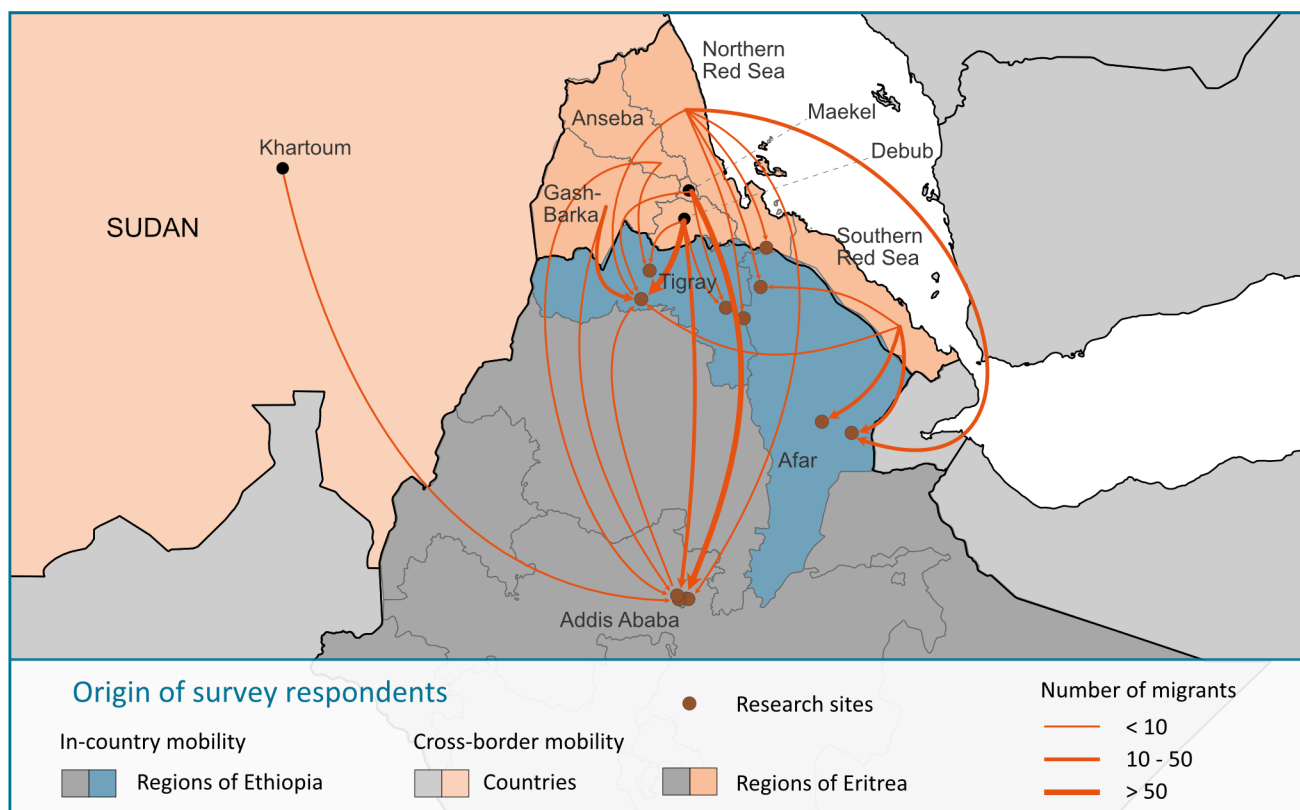
One challenge we faced was the refugee respondents' suspicion and expectations. Eritrean refugees regard the situation in their country of origin as continuously hazardous—they are also unsettled about the consequences of the ongoing peace talks between Ethiopian and Eritrea for their status. Together with concerns related to ongoing resettlement processes, these circumstances limited their readiness to talk and the extent of information they were willing to share. The collection of quantitative data was often less problematic than qualitative interviews because it is less personal. In qualitative interviews, the risks attached to openness are much higher for the respondents.

The team ensured that it clearly communicated objectives, conditions, and risks and that everyone's anonymity was respected. The research was carried out as unbiased as possible, avoiding (re-)traumatising, discriminating, endangering or exposing respondents in any way.

We did our research from October 2019 to September 2020. Everywhere but in Addis, we had completed our research before the Ethiopian government imposed COVID-19 restrictions and before an armed conflict started in the Tigray region on 4 November 2020. As to descriptions that refer to the situation in Tigray, the reader has to bear in mind recent changes (described in Box 1) and the fact that it was not possible to confirm any details about the situation in Tigray at the time of writing.

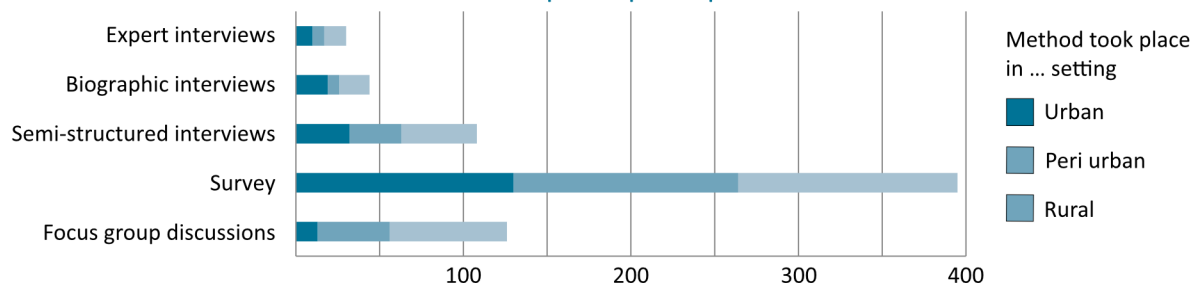


## TRAFIG research: Ethiopia

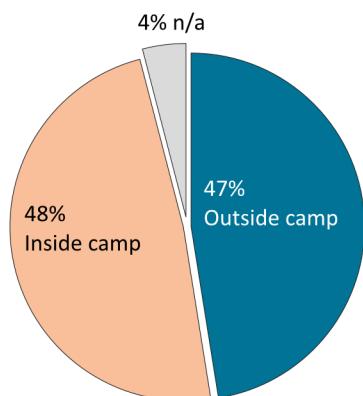


Time of empirical research:  
10/2019 - 09/2020

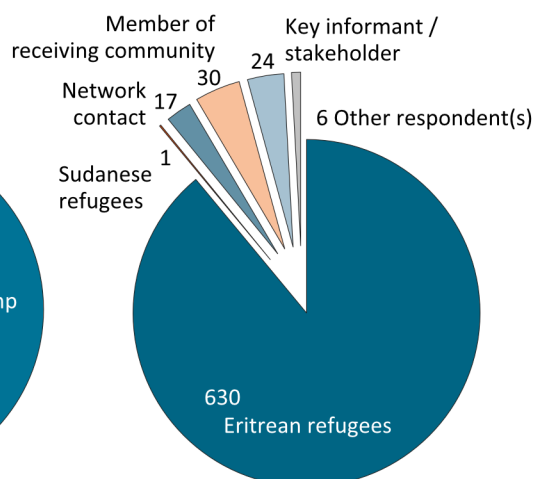
### Number of participants per method



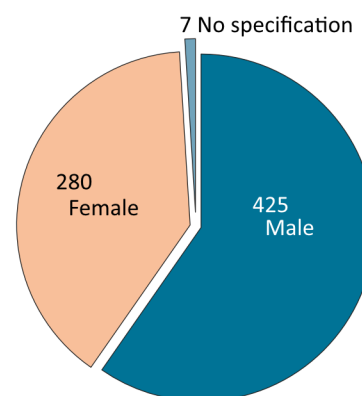
### Share of respondents living inside/outside camps



### Type of respondent



### Sex of respondent



Source: OpenStreetMap 2020, Natural Earth 2020, BICC 2021; Layout: Vincent Glasow, BICC, February 2021

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by BICC.

## 2. Protracted displacement in Ethiopia

Displacement in Ethiopia has two contrasting sides: On the one hand, the country has a record number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and, on the other, it has been hosting one of the largest refugee populations, whose situation can be considered as protracted (see footnote 1 above).<sup>9</sup> Our focus is on Eritrean refugees inside Ethiopia. Policy and the daily experiences of specific refugee groups are embedded into and affected by historical and current issues of internal displacement, of Ethiopian refugees abroad, and of refugees from other nations. Rules and regulations are, for example, different for persons displaced from Eritrea or South Sudan, which is, in turn, often related to the dynamic of external relations with those countries.

### 2.1 Internal displacement

Ethiopia has had IDPs since the 1980s, both due to ethnic conflict and natural disasters. From 2014 to 2018, young Ethiopians, in particular, staged a series of protests against the government, which had been in power since 1991. The protests were precipitated by unemployment, inequality, corruption, and human rights abuse, particularly following the 2005 general election (Tefera, 2019; McCracken, 2004; IDMC, 2009). The protests led to the coming to power of Abiy Ahmed in April 2018, who promised political reform. Immediately after the change of government, a series of inter-ethnic conflicts again led to the internal displacement of people. Nearly three million people were internally displaced in 2018 due to conflicts and violence. The figure was the biggest global record for the year (IDMC, 2019, p. 6). The problem also extended into 2019, when mid-year figures showed that there were 522,000 new conflict- and violence-induced displacements, the third-highest figure globally (IDMC, 2020).

Despite several positive political developments in 2018, old conflicts became more entrenched, and new conflicts escalated along various state borders in 2019. In the first half of 2020, there were 68,000 new internal displacements associated with conflict and violence and 301,000 with disasters (IDMC, 2020). Even if displacement trends were reversing in 2020 compared to previous years, Ethiopia was still facing a significant number of IDPs. Internal displacements are not only symptomatic of the internal political context but are also relevant for host-refugee relations: Some members of the hosting population we encountered were IDPs and sometimes more vulnerable than the refugees themselves.

<sup>9</sup> In the Ethiopian context, there is no specific definition of protracted displacement. Only one of the nine pledges the Ethiopian government made to support refugees states: "To allow for local integration of protracted refugees who have lived in Ethiopia for 20 years or more". This is just a cutting point for the pledge around local integration rather than a definition of protracted displacement.

### 2.2 International refuge

Ethiopia is also setting records when it comes to hosting refugees.<sup>10</sup> It is the second major refugee-hosting country in Africa, next to Uganda. By 31 October 2020, the country sheltered 796,440 registered refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2020a). The refugees live in 26 camps mainly located in Gambella, Benishangul Gumuz, Somali, Afar and Tigray as well as urban centres (mainly Addis Ababa). Refugees from Somalia are hosted mainly in the Somali region of Ethiopia; refugees from South Sudan and Sudan are hosted in refugee camps in Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz, and refugees from Eritrea (the focus group of our research) are hosted in Tigray and Afar regions.

As Table 1 below shows, the overwhelming majority of the refugees originate from South Sudan where they have fled from a protracted civil war. A large number of refugees come from Somalia and Eritrea. Others originate from Sudan, Yemen and the Great Lakes Region, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We focused on Eritrean refugees and their long history of displacement, their local and global connectivity and their trans-local and international mobility that would help us examine our research question: The role of connectivity and mobility in mitigating protracted displacement situations.

**Table 1: Breakdown by refugees' country of origin**

Country of origin	Number	%
South Sudan	<b>362,787</b>	<b>46.6</b>
Somalia	<b>201,465</b>	<b>26.3</b>
Eritrea	<b>178,315</b>	<b>22.4</b>
Sudan	<b>43,789</b>	<b>5.5</b>
Others	<b>7,930</b>	<b>1.0</b>
Yemen	<b>2,151</b>	<b>0.3</b>

Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/eth>, accessed 4 December 2020

<sup>10</sup> Even though the line between IDPs, (irregular) migrants and refugees is in many cases merely administrative, their legal, political, and social situation differs greatly. We use displaced persons to refer to all three categories – and refugees when referring to a legal status. Refugee in this sense, is an individual that according to international conventions is granted a special political status. According to the refugee conventions it is a person that, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (United Nations, 1951. Refugee Convention).

In most cases, refugees and respective host communities share a similar language, cultural practices and religion. A sizeable group of refugees and asylum seekers live out-of-camp, of whom 33,000 have registered as urban refugees in the capital Addis Ababa (UNHCR, 2020). Refugees are allowed to live in the urban centres on two grounds: Some benefit from the out-of-camp policy (OCP), some qualify for the urban assistance programme (UAP). The OCP started in 2010 and has only been used for Eritrean refugees. Eritrean refugees enjoy historical, linguistic, religious and ethnic commonalities with mainstream highland Ethiopian cultures. Due to their demographic characteristics (until 2018)—most of them young, male and single—they are supposed to be self-reliant. However, to benefit from the OCP, Eritrean refugees have to a) produce evidence that they have some income to live on without engaging in any income-generating activity; and b) present an Ethiopian citizen who serves as their guarantor. The UAP is a programme for all refugee groups based on their specific vulnerabilities, such as health and special protection needs that cannot be met in camps. Thus, while the OCP refugees do not receive any support as they are expected to be self-reliant, the UAP refugees receive financial assistance from UNHCR (Betts et al., 2019).

While Ethiopia not only receives one of the highest numbers of refugees, it also generates one of the highest numbers of refugees on the African continent. The Ethiopian Socialist revolution that overthrew the Imperial regime of Emperor Haile Selassie I (r. 1930–74) in 1974 and the Ethiopia–Somalia war (1977–78) caused the influx of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan. In 1977, Ethiopia's refugee population in the neighbouring countries was 200,000, but by the end of 1978, this number grew to 400,000. Most came from the northern part of Ethiopia that includes today's Tigray region and present-day Eritrea. In 1984, a famine forced 300,000 people, mostly from northern Ethiopia, to flee to neighbouring countries (Kraler et al., 2020, p. 17). The Tigray conflict that started on 3 November 2020 set off a new wave of Ethiopian refugees seeking asylum mainly in Sudan. The number of Ethiopians seeking refuge in eastern Sudan had reached 46,412 on 2 December 2020, one month into the conflict (UNHCR, 2020b). This event also led to massive internal displacement (see Box 1 "Current armed conflict in Tigray" on p. 13).

### 3. Key dimensions of figurations of displacement in Ethiopia and beyond

In the following, we dissect the empirical data in line with the five main pillars of TRAFIG's research: Governance regimes of aid and asylum, everyday uncertainty connected to refugee status and livelihoods, translocal network connections and mobility, alliances with the hosting communities and development potentials that (might) emerge out of displacement.

#### 3.1 Navigating through governance regimes of aid and asylum

The following section introduces governmental policies and their impact—both positively and negatively—on peoples' opportunities to overcome their situation of protracted displacement.

##### Official Ethiopian policy framework

Proclamation No. 409/2004 is the first statutory asylum and refugee law of Ethiopia. Before this proclamation, Ethiopia had neither concrete national policies nor proclamations to regulate situations of asylum seekers and refugees. Proclamation No. 409/2004 was enacted based on international and regional refugee conventions. It included provisions of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention. However, the 2004 proclamation is criticised for not spelling out refugees' rights and entitlements in a substantive framework that informs and facilitates their understanding and enforcement in specific national settings. Moreover, the proclamation restricted the rights to movement and work. It assumed that refugees would return to their countries of origin and were to be supported in camps until their return.

Ethiopia's legal regime on refugees and asylum seekers changed with the global changes in the refugee and migration frameworks. On 19 September 2016, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, reaffirming the importance of international refugee rights and committing to strengthen protection and support for people on the move (UNGA, 2016). Based on the request of the UN General Assembly, UNHCR initiated and developed a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) that featured large-scale movements of refugees and protracted refugee situations with four key objectives: (a) ease pressure on host countries, (b) enhance refugee self-reliance, (c) expand access to third-country solutions, and (d) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. Subsequently, in December 2018, UNGA affirmed a non-binding Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) which incorporates the CRRF and a plan of action (UNGA, 2018).

Ethiopia was one of the 17 refugee-hosting states that endorsed the New York Declaration arising from the New York Summit. Following that, Ethiopia co-hosted a high-level meeting on refugees in New York on 20 September 2016, where it committed to delivering on nine sets of pledges<sup>11</sup> that anticipated to substantially expand the protection, socio-economic services, and opportunities provided to refugees living within its jurisdiction (ARRA, 2017; Nigusie & Carver, 2019).

A year later, in 2017, the Ethiopian government launched its roadmap (see ARRA, 2017) to implement the pledges and the application of the CRRF and established a steering committee. The pledges were organised into six thematic areas: Out-of-Camp, Education, Work and Livelihoods, Documentation, Other Social and Basic Services and Local Integration. The Roadmap outlined the bureaucratic structures that would oversee implementation, emphasising a whole-of-government approach (Nigusie & Carver, 2019, p. 7) to deliver through joint ownership by the Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) and the Ministry of Finance. In February 2017, the Ethiopian government agreed on being among the first countries to implement the CRRF. By mid-2018, a new Refugee Proclamation had been drafted with the support of UNHCR and key donors. The new Refugee Proclamation was ultimately adopted by parliament in January 2019 (Proclamation 1110/2019).

The new refugee proclamation is acclaimed for being one of Africa's most progressive refugee laws (UNHCR, 2020). Like in its predecessor (Proclamation 409/2004), Ethiopia maintains an open-door policy for refugee inflows and allows humanitarian access and protection to those seeking asylum. Moreover, the new proclamation made progressive changes. According to Article 26, Sub-articles 1-10 of Proclamation 1110/2019, refugees can enjoy employment and property rights that will help them to become self-reliant. They have the right to employment in agriculture, industry and small and micro-enterprises such as handicrafts. The new job compact in the proclamation provides refugees with the right to engage in paid employment,

11 The nine pledges are: (1) Expansion of the out-of-camp policy (OCP) to ten per cent of the refugee population, (2) Increase of education enrolment among refugees, (3) Provision of work permits to refugees with permanent residence, (4) Provision of work permits to graduate refugees in areas permitted for foreign workers, (5) Making irrigable land available to 100,000 people for crop production, both refugees and hosts (6) Developing industrial parks, with 30 per cent of jobs for refugees, (7) Making more documentation available to refugees, (8) Enhance the provision of basic and social services, (9) Making local integration available to refugees who have been in Ethiopia for more than 20 years. (The December 2017 Roadmap translated these into six thematic areas, with pledges 3-6 grouped under Work and Livelihoods.)

such as in agriculture, industrial parks, small and micro-scale enterprises, handicrafts, and commerce. The proclamation also gives refugees and asylum seekers the right to a residence permit once the refugee has been selected for employment, subject to renewal every five years. They also have the right to open bank accounts, legally register births and marriages and attend primary school. Last but not least, the new proclamation has unambiguously outlined a comprehensive set of ‘rights and obligations’—mostly along the lines provided under international instruments.

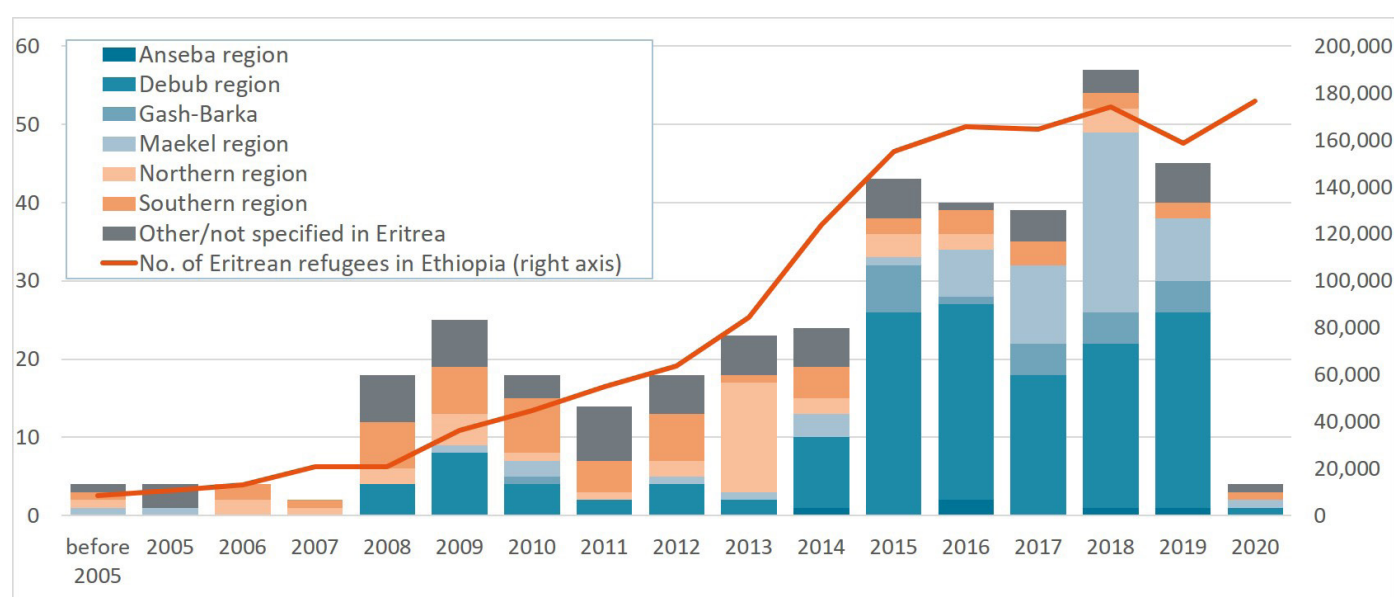
## Governing the influx of Eritrean refugees

Five years after Eritrea’s independence in 1993, the 1998–2000 bloody Eritrean–Ethiopian war began, and so did the influx of Eritrean refugees. Between 1998 and 2018, the border between the two countries was closed and extremely militarised. The Ethiopian government set up a system to receive Eritreans who managed to cross the border through 17 entry points and took them to three collection centres near the border (Adi Nebrid, Adwa and Fatsi). From there, they were transported to a screening centre at Inda Abbaguna, 17 km from Shire town. Until January 2020, Eritrean asylum seekers were accepted on prima facie bases and were all assigned to one of the six refugee camps, where they were screened and registered within a few days. Their allocation was mainly based on ethnicity: Two camps in Afar regional state are populated by the Afar; Shimelba camp in Tigray is dominated by the Kunama, and the remaining three camps (Mai Aini, Adi Harush and Hitsats) are mainly inhabited by the Tigriyna.

The number of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia has steadily grown over the last 15 years from just over 10,000 persons in 2005 to an estimated 177,000 persons in 2020 (see Figure 2). However, the respective numbers of Eritreans fleeing to Ethiopia from their regions of origin has changed. Our survey indicates that most Eritrean Afars fled to the country six to twelve years ago, whereas more Tigriynas arrived in recent years.

The 2018 peace deal and the loosened border controls are a double-edged sword for the Eritrean refugees. The negative side is that, in January 2020, the Ethiopian government switched from recognising Eritrean refugees prima facie to a case by case approach (Eint-BICC-MR--001-ETH). Following the recent conflict (Box 1) and the defeat of the ruling party in Tigray, the Ethiopian government confirmed in December 2020 that Hitsats and Shimelba camps will be closed down, and refugees will be moved to Adi-Harush and Mai Aini camps. On the positive side, ARRA reduced the security screening time for OCP candidates from 45 to 1 to 7 days, and refugees are no longer required to provide a guarantor to live outside a camp. Papers for OCP status (practically an equivalent to a residence permit in the cities) are to be handed out swiftly once individuals waive aid claims. In March 2020 when we were in the field, a functioning procedure for working permits was scheduled to be in place by July 2020, the implementation might have been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 2: Number of registered Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and survey respondents' year of departure from Eritrea (according to region of origin)**



Source: UNHCR online database, accessed 20 February 2021, and TRAFIG survey data (n=395)



### Box 1: Effects of armed conflict in Tigray

*The peace deal of 2018 between the Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki and his Ethiopian counterpart Abiy Ahmed and the subsequent brief opening of the border helped to highlight commonalities between both nations. It also allowed for dynamic interaction among refugees, receiving and origin communities. The new arrival of thousands of Eritrean refugees undeniably created new tensions between hosts and refugees regarding housing and access to basic services. Ethiopia's commitment to the Global Compact for Refugees/ CRRF led to revised laws and policies, and the accelerating implementation of these reforms on the ground gave hope that viable solutions would be found.*

*However, since war broke out in November 2020, Eritrean refugees have found themselves at the centre of the conflict. All the camps in Tigray are located in the area of conflict. There were reports that Hitsats and Shimelba camps were partially destroyed, and refugees were forced to leave. The media report about the disappearance of thousands of refugees, and, at the time of writing, UNHCR is trying to establish the whereabouts of several thousand Eritreans. Contradictory accounts state that they were trafficked back across the border or abducted by the TPLF. Yet ARRA declared that it has traced their whereabouts, most of them were dispersed in other camps, towns and cities in Amhara region and Addis Ababa.<sup>1</sup> According to ARRA, some refugees returned to Eritrea of their own volition because of the conflict and the interruption of provisions at the camps. Another open question remains whether Eritrean forces participated in the conflict against the TPLF and whether the refugees have been exposed to forces they sought to escape. While the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments denied the Eritrean army's participation, the TPLF and some global actors claim otherwise. The unlimited military service in Eritrea, justified mainly by the very conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, caused many Eritreans to flee. Eritrea considers them deserters. From this viewpoint, the opening of the border resulting from the rapprochement between their country of origin and the host country in 2018 is fraught with risks for the refugees.*

*After having cooperated closely in the civil war against the authoritarian Marxist regime known as the Derg on both sides of the current border before Eritrea's independence, the growing estrangement of their leaders led to an international war in 1998 and a military stalemate that lasted until 2018. When the TPLF lost its hold over Addis Ababa and Abiy Ahmed came to power, he finally brokered a peace deal between both nations for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Tigray nevertheless maintained their opposition to their northern neighbour. This opposition also affected Eritrean Tigrinya refugees. In 2020, questions of camp management had become highly politicised, and the refugees became a bargaining chip in the dispute between the central and the regional government. ARRA, as a central government institution, encountered increasing difficulties in cooperating with Tigrayan authorities. The TPLF has furthermore been supporting oppositional Eritreans in Tigray up to today. Eritrea, in turn, is now cooperating with the Ethiopian Army, at least by offering them opportunities for retreat and logistical support.*

<sup>1</sup> See <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2021/02/11/agency-says-eritrean-refugees-returning-to-camps/>

### From policy to practice

In the second half of 2019, some of the promises in the new proclamation were fulfilled. While refugees can register births and marriages, open bank accounts and buy SIM cards, the right to work, residence permits, local integration and diminishing encampment remain only on paper. Refugees still have to find means to get jobs in the informal sector. Several scholars have expressed their concern about the practicability of the highly ambitious proclamation regarding employment (Betts et al., 2019; Fekadu & Deshinghar, 2019; Mehari, 2019). Critics were sceptical if a country strained by unemployment with 19 per cent of urban youth unemployment in 2018 (CSA, 2019) could provide jobs for that many refugees. Besides, no regulation has been enacted on the implementation of the proclamation's provisions. According to Art. 46 Sub-article 1 of the new proclamation, the Council of Ministers may issue regulations for its proper implementation, and Sub-article 2 tasks ARRA with issuing directives for the regulations' implementation. According to a key informant from ARRA, some progress has been made in enacting the directives, yet no regulations had been issued by the end of 2020 (Eint-Bicc-MR-001-ETH).

According to key informants from UNHCR and ARRA, the Ethiopian government is not to blame for unfulfilled promises. One informant stated:

*If you look at the CRRF, many provisions are stipulated requiring international collaboration. The ambitious work pledges are meant to be realised by the support of international donors. However, due to the existing international crisis in global refugees and COVID-19, there are no programmes and projects funded by the international community to support the refugees formally get works. Programmes on Eritrean refugees are especially almost zero. If at all, some interest is shown for South Sudanese and Somali refugees. Since most of the Eritrean refugees are in the young age group, some partners focus on skills training instead of job creation. If you ask, many Eritrean refugees will show you training certificates in three or more skills. However, there is no formal employment opportunity (EInt-AAU-DA-024-ETH).*

Besides ARRA and UNHCR, a few international partner NGOs support urban refugees and those in camps. In the cities, several NGOs are working on education, health and livelihood support. Some NGOs support refugees who are proven to have chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney problems, hypertension, or any physical disability (monthly allowance of cash of around 2,100 birr (US \$53) per month) in coordination with ARRA/UNHCR. Family members of those eligible for medical allowance also get free medical care and financial support to cover school fees and educational materials. Vulnerable urban refugees frequently mentioned Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). It provides them with food, such as five kilos of rice and one litre of oil a month to the most vulnerable and better assistance to refugees with chronic health problems. In general, the provision of support to urban refugees lags far behind. According to our survey, three of four Eritrean refugees living outside of camps did not receive any support within the last year from the government, international organisations or local NGOs. This is partly because most urban refugees are OCP beneficiaries who have forfeited their right to aid.

Refugees also complain about the ineffectiveness and possible corruption of international organisations, mainly UNHCR. A refugee in Adi Harush camp criticised: *"We see UNHCR in the camp only through its flag. It is not doing anything, especially regarding resettlement"* (Sint-AAU-MG—010-ETH). Tekeste in Addis Ababa's Gofa Mebrathayil commented: *"UNHCR is a smokeless factory"*, referring to widespread corruption in the agency (Sint-AAU-FA-001-ETH). Nearly every refugee has something negative to say about corruption in UNHCR. Like Jemal in Adi Harush camp:

*UNHCR is a bogus father who enjoys food and beer while his kids are starving at home. The corruption and abuses at UNHCR are really disgusting (Sint-AAU-FA-010-ETH).*

The major corruption allegation by the refugees is a scheme where resettlement opportunities are given to Ethiopian citizens who are passed off as Eritreans because they speak the same language as the refugees—either through bribing or nepotism.

However, our research could not confirm the validity of this allegation. Actually, in our discussion with the actors in refugee administration and humanitarian aid, they stress that many of these allegations are caused by widespread misinformation or the misconception that refugees have concerning the agencies' role, competences and mandates. According to some camp officials, the receiving countries and not ARRA or UNHCR determine the resettlement opportunities (EInt-AAU-FA-002-ETH). They also stress that international support and funds have declined following multiple global conflicts like the Syrian or the Yemen crises and the COVID-19 pandemic (EInt-AAU-DA-024-ETH).

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we presented the Ethiopian refugee governance framework. Recent refugee-related regulations such as the out-of-camp policy (OCP) and the revised 2019 proclamation are relevant to the everyday lives of the refugees. Many thousands of Eritrean refugees have followed the OCP and benefitted from entitlements to open bank accounts, access telecommunications and obtain ID cards. OCP has also helped refugees navigate through certain remaining constraints: So far, refugees do not have work permits, as the crucial provision of the 2019 revised proclamation has not yet been implemented. In this situation, the OCP is a means to get access to towns and cities where refugees find more opportunities like accessing businesses/labour positions informally.

However, the pace of implementation of the remaining provisions in the 2019 proclamation is slow. The international community has also failed to live up to its promises of increasing funds and resettlement opportunities, which only delays the implementation of the proclamation even further.

### Key findings

- *The implementation of crucial elements of a refugee policy reform such as official work and business permits is still pending.*
- *The factual easing of restrictions has facilitated numerous improvements for refugees' livelihoods.*
- *The recent changes of the existing policies have benefited refugees with connections to resourceful networks more than those with less connections.*



## 3.2 Living in limbo: Livelihoods, (in)security and precarity in local settings

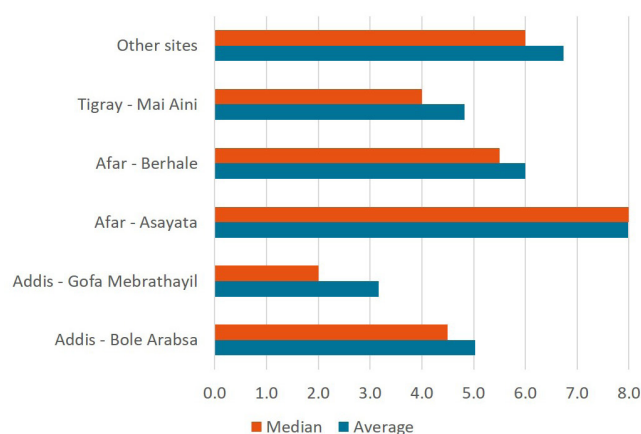
This section discusses the everyday lives of Eritrean refugees in protracted displacement situations. Many thousands of Eritrean refugees are ‘stuck’ in six refugee camps and in several small and big cities, where they experience intractable phases of waiting and immobility. The first aspect of limbo is the state of waiting for an uncertain and indefinite period of time without a durable solution. The second is the impact of this waiting on the livelihoods of refugees in camps and in urban centres.

### Intractable waiting

Displacement becomes protracted if no solution to one’s individual situation is in sight and if options that provide a pathway towards a better future, such as sustainable livelihoods, permanent residency, resettlement or onward mobility, remain blocked. The persons we interviewed in our survey were displaced for 5.5 years on average—statistically, their situation could thus be classified as a protracted refugee situation. The times they had to endure in displacement differed significantly between the study sites (see Figure 3). The results clearly show that encampment contributes to protracting a displacement situation, and the longer one stays, the less likely it seems that one will find a way out (see Figure 4). Our survey results reveal that those who left the camp through the OCP, which started in 2010, also have the opportunity to resettle through different means: family reunification UNHCR, secondary irregular migration or resettlement through UNHCR.

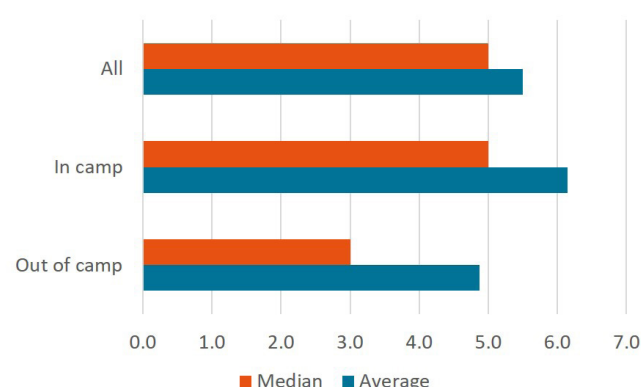
Eritrean Afar who live in Aysaita camp have been in exile for eight years on average, whereas those in Mai Aini camp just under five years. Urban refugees benefitting from the OCP not only enjoyed more diverse livelihood options but have also been in Ethiopia for a shorter period. Eritrean refugees have tradi-

**Figure 3: Eritrean refugees’ time in displacement according to study site**



Source: TRAFIG survey data (n=395)

**Figure 4: Time in displacement of Eritrean refugees living in- and outside of camps**



Source: TRAFIG survey data (n=395)

tionally settled in Gofa Mebrathayil and Bole-Harabssa, both neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa. The fact that the refugees stay an average of five years in Bole-Harabssa and only three years in Gofa Mebrathayil indicates that refugees who are better connected and have better financial resources live there and leave earlier, while those refugees whose connections have only limited financial means to assist them prefer the peri-urban Bole-Harabssa where renting a house is relatively cheaper.

Refugees, particularly those who have stayed in the camps for a prolonged time, are worried about having to wait indefinitely. Our informant from Shimelba camp, who has been there since its establishment in 2004, reported: “*We feel like we are blocked from all opportunities*” (Eint-AAU-FA-012-ETH). Most of the Kunama refugees in Shimelba have, for example, spent 20 years in camps waiting for the day that they can leave (no quantitative data was collected in Shimelba). They arrived in 2000 and spent four years in a ‘temporary camp’ under the Ethiopian government’s protection and support before moving to Shimelba. Tadde, a participant in a focus group discussion, who was among the early arrivals, stated:

*Spending 20 years at a place without a job is simply devastating (...). Many people here have developed mental problems. When you talk to them, they may look [like they are] listening to you, but, they cannot hear you. They move around, but they have become insensitive to their environment (Eint-AAU-FA-012-ETH).*

The absence of a durable solution, and limited prospects for the future have left many on the brink of despair and hopelessness. Frank, who was, like Tadde, a Refugee Central Committee member, said: “*If human beings cannot change themselves through education, if they cannot improve themselves by working, they are valueless.*” (Eint-AAU-FA-012-ETH).

For most Eritrean refugees in camps in northern Ethiopia, such feelings of being in limbo even started before they arrived in the refugee camps. Most of them were conscripted by force to the Eritrean military indefinitely. They had been waiting for the day they would be freed from the military service—called Sawa—until they finally ran away to refugee camps or to cities where they continue to wait for a durable solution. Tekeste is a 30-year-old man we interviewed in Addis Ababa in November 2019. He joined the army just as he completed grade eleven. In Eritrea, it is mandatory to join the military training camp upon completing grade eleven and attend grade twelve, the final year of high school, at the camp side by side with military training. When he tried to run away, he was caught and spent five years in prison. He finally managed to escape from prison in 2012 and arrived in Ethiopia. After a relatively short time in Adi Harush camp, he arrived in Addis Ababa in 2013 where he was eligible for the urban assistance programme for medical reasons. He considered that more than one-third of his life had been unproductive, a time he had been waiting to transit to a ‘productive life.’<sup>12</sup> He said: *“I wasted thirteen years of my life, and I do not know what will happen next. I am just waiting and waiting”* (Sint-AAU-FA-001-ETH).

#### Box 2: The case of Jemal

*Jemal was a member of the Eritrean army, like most of our interviewees. He arrived in 2007 and lived in the Shimelba camp. After spending over six years in camps, in 2013, when most of the refugees—including his friends—left through Libya, he developed mental health problems and was admitted to Amanuel hospital, a psychiatric hospital in Addis Ababa. He comes from a poor family. He has a sister in Saudi Arabia who lives from hand to mouth. He spent over two years in hospital and returned to Adi Harush when his situation improved in 2015. In 2019, he developed tuberculosis. We interviewed him shortly after his recovery. For Jemal, who had lost hope on resettlement and cannot return to Eritrea until the current Eritrean regime is in power, local integration is the only way out of protracted displacement. Jemal worked as a plumber and painter before he was forced to join the Eritrean military in 1998. Now he is eager to see the revised proclamation implemented so that he can leave the camp to be self-reliant and work as a plumber in one of the towns (Bint-AAU-FA-016-ETH).*

Being stuck in ‘waiting time’ triggers desperation, and many start drinking alcohol to pass the time. In Adi Harush, several youth were already drunk at 10 a.m. In Addis Ababa, a neighbour in Gofa Mebrathayil complained that young Eritrean refugees shout and disturb the area at night as they are drunk. The persons of concern are young and unmarried. They left their parents at a young age to join the military. After ending up in refugee camps, they are now waiting indefinitely to be allowed to realise their aspirations: Getting employed, building a house, buying a plot for the family, starting a family, pursuing a higher degree and enabling their future children to do so. Some of them have been waiting for work permits. Still, some are waiting to return to Eritrea should the political condition they ran away from change. Many of them are waiting to resettle in a third country. In the worst scenario, the desperation caused by indefinite waiting affects their mental health like in Jemal’s case: (see Box 2)

#### Box 3: Amiche—Being on the fence

*Some Eritrean refugees are nicknamed Amiche (after an old Italian company that used to assemble vehicles in Addis Ababa). Amiche is a hybrid identity. They are persons of Eritrean descent who were brought up in Ethiopia before Eritrean independence (Riggan, 2011). Their families had migrated or been displaced from Eritrea before or during the thirty-year Eritrean war of independence (1960 to 1991). During this period, many Eritreans had sought asylum in different neighbouring countries, which laid the foundation for the large Eritrean diasporic community around the world. When Eritrea won independence in 1991, many Eritreans who had spent the years of war in neighbouring countries returned home—including many of those in Ethiopia. With the beginning of the Ethiopia–Eritrea war in 1998, many of the Eritreans who had initially remained in Ethiopia (after independence) were deported to Eritrea. Josef, a 52 years old refugee in Adi Harush, is one of them. His father was among those who fled Eritrea in the late 1960s due to the war. He assumed a job in a multinational company in Addis Ababa. In 1985 Josef, who was then grade twelve, escaped from military conscription in Ethiopia under the Derg military regime by running away to relatives in Djibouti. Back from Djibouti, in 1988, he completed high school and joined an engineering course in the Ethiopian Airforce. Before he finished the course, Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in May 1991, and his father—who had been waiting for that day to come—took his family, including Josef, back to Eritrea. Josef managed to secure a job at Assab fuel refinery. In 1998, when the Eritrean–Ethiopian war started, Josef was forced to join the military service in Eritrea—the service he had run away from in Ethiopia ten years ago. He fought in the Eritrea–Ethiopia war between 1998 and 2000. He was sent to prison when he*

<sup>12</sup> The feeling of doing nothing productive is typical for many protracted displacement situations (PDS). This includes children from early age on (Mann, 2008).

*criticised the Eritrean regime. When he was released from prison, he escaped to Sudan and made it back to Ethiopia in 2011. This time, Josef returned as a refugee, not as a citizen. In 2015, refugees in Adi Harush camp went out on the streets complaining about their treatment by the Ethiopian government. This led to the arrest of several refugees accused of organising the protest, and Josef was among them. Even though he was released after four months of detention, his scheduled resettlement to the United States was cancelled as he was accused of involvement in violence.*

*The Amiche symbolise the long-standing and vicious circle of displacement, deportation and the situation of living in limbo as a whole. Individuals such as Josef have repeatedly been going through different periods of protracted displacement and still wait for the time when they can lead a stable life.*

Living in a condition where they can neither control nor change their lives, many expressed feeling trapped in limbo. Living in the camp as well as extended waiting periods take a physical and emotional toll. In a focus group discussion in Adi Harush with refugee representatives, one participant described the conditions as follows:

*This is a prison where the young's dream is shattered, where they cannot work or bring any change in their lives. We are spared from the prisons in Eritrea that is all... the refugee camps in Ethiopia, [are] a big prison [where] you are allowed to see the sun and feel the wind. [Other than that], many of the young have developed disabilities—physically and mentally. (...) The dreams of our young generation are dimmed. Moreover, living as a victim, most have become weak physically and mentally (...) those who were very strong with a desire for education and work live in darkness. That is how I see it. The young could not work, marry and have children or change the social status and cannot even move (FGD-AAU-MG-022-ETH).*

## Livelihood limbo in camps

Eritrean refugees' livelihoods in Ethiopia can be divided into two broader contexts: Camp and urban (see Figure 5). Nearly all refugees interviewed near or in the camps (97%) stated that the camp provides them with shelter, and 90 per cent said that they had not worked in the last month for pay or profit. Life in the refugee camps is thus mainly based on the distribution of rations through UNHCR and ARRA. Refugees receive between 10 and 16 kg of cereal (with a small proportion of pulses, oil, sugar and salt) monthly, depending on the availability of aid.<sup>13</sup>

All informants allege that the amount of the ration given per month is not enough for their subsistence. Whenever there is not enough food aid from donors, the ration will be downsized and sometimes, they are given some cash to fill the gap. According to Tadde who lived in camps for nearly two decades: *"You don't have the opportunity in the camp to go out and work with the knowledge and the skill you have"* (Bint-AAU-FA-013-ETH). According to him and many others living in the camp, they are unable to meet their daily basic needs, let alone chase their dreams.

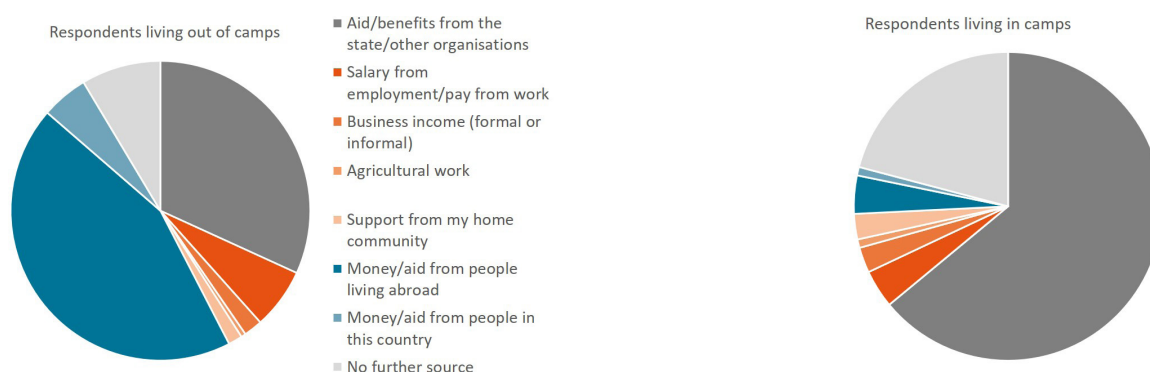
The situation is even worse among single mothers who are even more vulnerable since they usually have to look after the children. As the heavy load of being responsible for the day-to-day provision of children rests on women's shoulders, situations of displacement usually characterised by a lack of such provisions affect women more than men. Explaining the downside of being a single mother and not having connections in the camps, a refugee stated: *"You will be starved to death. There is a woman who cannot get a bar of soap to wash her clothes"* (Miheret, cf. Box 6) (Bint-AAU-MG-007-ETH). Respondents also mentioned that refugees connected with the host community have the opportunity to move outside the camp and engage in the informal labour market to augment their income. Single mothers of small children with no childcare find it difficult to engage in such activities. A single mother's mobility is more restricted, and this, in turn, affects her network and connectivity (cf. 4.1).

Though all camps host refugees who experience livelihood limbo, camps inhabited by the Kunama and Afar refugees who mostly fled as a family to escape from the Eritrean regime are more vulnerable. As will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, these two groups are less connected and less mobile and continue to struggle with livelihood limbo in a very precarious environment. Fatuma, a 35-year-old Afar woman who is married with two children explains:

*My destination was to go to a place where there is peace, not a specific country. It was my husband's decision to leave. (...) We do not have any intention of going back to Eritrea unless there is peace and food. (...) I earn my living making Afar rugs made out of grass (Diborah). At times I manage to make one rug or two rugs with simple design depending on the week. I buy the rug materials for 100 birr (US \$2.5), and I sell it depending on the design and demand for between 100 and 180 birr (US \$4.5). They give us five kilos flour per person, which is not enough, so we borrow from the shop to buy more, and once I earn money from the profit, I pay them back (Sint-AAU-MG-033-ETH).*

<sup>13</sup> Rations are complemented with supplementary food for targeted vulnerable groups. Pregnant and lactating women receive premixed supplementary rations (CSB+ oil, and sugar). All children 6-23 months receive, when available, super cereal plus (CSB++) or premixed rations (ARRA, UNHCR, UNWFP, 2016).

Figure 5: Livelihood portfolio of Eritrean refugees living in/out of camps (primary sources only)



Source: UNHCR online database, accessed 20 February 2021, and TRAFIG survey data (n=395)

The priority of such vulnerable former pastoral families was to seek a place where they get protection and peace. After securing protection and shelter, they use different livelihood strategies to sustain their family, as Fatuma's case shows.

A small proportion of refugees have managed to access paid jobs (and are called incentive workers in the official ARRA/ UNHCR language) in the camps: Some teach in the UNHCR-run schools, and others are employed by NGOs operating in the camps. A few of them, only three per cent in our survey, also run businesses. According to Mohammed, an NGO staff member working on the power supply in Hitsats, 78 individuals own private generators in Hitsats camp. They sell power to their neighbours, bars and shops (Eint-AAU-FA-006-ETH). In such situations, sharing and reciprocity are survival mechanisms in the camps. Those sharing a single shelter usually share resources. Some of them who do not get resources reciprocate by contributing labour.

### Urban refugees' livelihoods in limbo

For urban refugees in Addis Ababa, housing, health and food are the key challenges—in this order of importance. According to our survey information, 87 per cent of urban refugees live in a rented house, flat or room. Paying rent for housing is stressful because rent is quite high, especially for refugees who do not have (a stable) income. After housing, health is the second most significant issue for urban refugees. Informants explained that they can be flexible with food—they may not eat perhaps for a day or more, or survive by eating only once a day for longer periods. But when falling sick, money is the only recourse. Various camp residents reported having moved from Addis Ababa back to the camp due to the unaffordable housing costs and the expensive health care system.

Urban refugee respondents attempt to meet the expense of living in urban centres through mostly informal work. Refugees have different levels of access to informal skilled and unskilled labour. Nearly all, namely 93 per cent of the refugees we interviewed in the cities stated that they had not worked in the last month for pay or profit, mostly due to a lack of work permits, experience or language competence. Yet surprisingly, despite this, many do work, albeit occasionally, to sustain their life. Also, in the urban context, refugees are poorly paid. Many of them moved to urban centres counting on remittances for survival (see Figure 5) which, due to their irregular nature, not always suffice to make ends meet there. A story of Nigsti, a 28-year-old female refugee in Addis Ababa, illustrates the scope of the challenge the livelihood limbo constitutes in Addis Ababa:

*First, when he [a broker] saw me, he was happy, and even he was interested in giving priority for me in giving me a job. Then he asked me for a copy of my ID card and a copy of my guarantee person's ID. Then I gave him a copy of my refugee ID card. He saw my ID, and he got confused and asked me whether I have a kebele ID card.<sup>14</sup> I told him that I am a refugee and I do not have an Ethiopian ID card. Then the broker immediately changed his attitude and told me that for him, it was difficult to connect me with employers. He sent other girls to be employed, and I stayed in his office and begged him to do something. Finally, he agreed to search a job for me, even a smaller one. I didn't have an option and agreed with his idea, and I joined a cafeteria with a small salary. Even after starting the work, the owner of the cafeteria mistreated me because of [me] not having a guarantor. He considered he did me a favour hiring me in his cafeteria. He used to impose more work on me. Finally, I couldn't cope with the high workload and the little payment; then I stopped working in the cafeteria (BInt-AAU-DA-012-ETH).*

14 Residence card also certifying the Ethiopian nationality of the holder



Even though several NGOs provide vocational training and many refugees have benefited from a training scheme, there is little room for them to use the skills gained due to the absence of work permits. A head of a Shire branch of an international NGO asserted: “I have not seen any refugee who changed his/

#### Box 4: Almaz’s story of urban livelihood vulnerability

*Almaz joined Hitsat refugee camp in 2015. During her stay for six months in the camp, she earned some income by making tea, preparing food and handicrafts. Later, she heard about life as an urban refugee. Coincidentally, she also learned about an Eritrean family flying to Addis Ababa from the United States for a three-month vacation. She came to Addis Ababa and started serving the family as a housemaid. She was excited when the family promised to take her to America. However, after a while, they became dissatisfied with Almaz because they wanted her to be in the house continuously. Almaz went to ARRA and UNHRC to follow up on her case. She had an Eritrean refugee boyfriend who was already living in Addis Ababa. He advised her to work at a nightclub whose owner he knew and acted as her guarantor. In the nightclub, she worked as a DJ for US \$27 per month, a salary she couldn't afford to live on, so she also worked as a waitress in the same club for eight months. Yet working as a waitress didn't pay well enough either. Her roommate complained about her small contribution to the house rent and food items. Then her boyfriend left for Australia without telling her, and she was forced to engage in sex work. As she became increasingly uncomfortable with it, she quit and trained for four months at the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) as a nanny. Yet, this training was futile as employers would not accept a refugee ID.*

*Moreover, her health deteriorated. When she went for a check-up, she tested HIV/AIDS positive. Almaz went to a protestant church and began studying the Bible. Her belief helped her to be strong. In the church, she met a woman who employed her as a housemaid without a guarantee. Almaz worked in the woman's house for five months before she joined another training offered for Eritrean refugees by JRS. She got a certificate in hairdressing. However, she could not tolerate the high temperature in the beauty salons, so she went to a nannies' training. After completing the training, she couldn't work as a nanny because people were afraid of her weak physical condition. Creating her own business was not an option due to a lack of capital and/or work permit. Working in cafeterias as a waitress was difficult for the same reasons—when people knew that she was a refugee, they did not employ her at all or employed her for a lower salary than they would usually pay. Facing a continuous increase in rent, a strict house owner who does not tolerate rent payments later than on due date and high cost of food, Almaz currently only makes ends meet thanks to the help of her friends living in Europe (BInt-AAU-DA-012-ETH).*

her life due to the training we give” (Eint-AAU-FA-002-ETH). Most of them have got the skill to become barbers, wood and metal workers, waiters, or coffee sellers. Only refugees who have relatives or personal connections manage to get a job in the informal market (cf. 3.3 below). Refugees try their best to maximise the role of such personal social relations; however, the official policies and work practices always impose limitations on their efforts. Many of them are refused employment for not having a work permit; they could be expelled or abused at work or paid poorly. Consider the case of Hadush, who lives in Addis Ababa: Hadush used to work in a garage for US \$11 a week. While he was working, he sustained an injury to his arm. The medical treatment cost a lot of money, but he had no health insurance, as his employment was informal. No one covered the expenses for treatment. As a result, he quit working and has never worked again (SsInt-AAU-DA-008-ETH).

Our research suggests that women seem to be even more vulnerable and that among them, there are many victims of sexually transmitted diseases like in Almaz’s case. This indicates a prevalence of women who have to resort to sex work as a livelihood option.

Furthermore, usually, family members who require the most care, such as young children, are given priority at other family members' expense. Interviews with single mothers show that they had fled Eritrea with their spouse but lost contact after the husband engaged in secondary migration—often intending to reach Europe. Or they lost their husbands while fleeing to Ethiopia with their children. Some of our informants mentioned that their husbands used to support them, while others confirmed that they fled with their children after having agreed with their spouse to opt for family reunification (cf. 4.1 below). In general, however, our survey findings indicate that transnational network support is the most decisive livelihood source of refugees who live outside of camps: 44 per cent of urban refugees stated that they—occasionally or regularly—receive money or aid from family members or friends living in another country (see Figure 5). Translocal support that is provided through one’s network within Ethiopia seems to be of less significance—at least in financial terms.

Although almost one-third of the survey respondents living out of camps stated that they do (occasionally) draw on aid or welfare benefits from the state or other organisations to support themselves (Figure 5), they cannot count on regular support like those who live in camps. Life in limbo for Eritrean urban refugees thus means being forced into ‘self-reliance’ due to a lack of support from aid agencies, yet not having the means nor the opportunity to realise their potential. They are neither sure about resettlement in a third country nor the prospect of working in the host country. As going back to their country of origin is not an option as long as the current oppressive regime is in power, the plans of individuals to learn and acquire a skill, marry and set up a family wane. Refugees often mention factors

such as a lack of work permits and job opportunities as the most important structural problems. Hopes associated with the new policy on work permits for refugees are therefore high but have not yet materialised. In Almaz' case, for instance, ARRA told her that the government was still working on the implementation mechanism of the proclamation when they approached the agency on this matter (BInt-AAU-DA-012-ETH).

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we discussed Eritrean refugees' state of limbo in indefinite periods of waiting. Many Eritreans have been up in the air since the long war of independence (1960 to 1991). Eritrean youth are displaced from their family when they have to join military training camps—the beginning of an indefinite military service. Those who managed to run away from the military and join refugee camps and towns and cities in Ethiopia continue another phase of uncertain and indefinite waiting: Their aspiration to study, work, establish a family and lead a stable life, all hope to transit to 'productive life' is put on hold as new legislation on work permits for refugees, for instance, is not yet implemented. Our results nevertheless show that even the most vulnerable refugees are actively trying to break out of limbo.

The downward spiral triggered by displacement is often related to fractured connections. Context and strategies vary significantly between camps, ethnicities (Kunama, Afar and Tigrinya), and households. We found that the major difference between camps and urban contexts was the type of vulnerabilities that refugees experience and their strategies to overcome or at least reduce them. Out-of-camp populations in general have better access to informal work. This is crucial as long as official work permits are missing but also carries risks to engage in high-risk activities. Our results also indicate that encampment contributes to protracting a displacement situation. The longer the refugees remain in the camp, the less likely they are to find a way out. But out-of-camp residents, too, stated that they rely partly on aid or welfare benefits. Across all researched areas, long periods of waiting lead to frustrations, despair and mental problems. The most vulnerable households are often those led by single mothers.

### Key findings

- *Eritreans have experienced a long-standing situation of living in limbo due to a vicious circle of displacement, increasing vulnerability, and the lack of durable solutions.*
- *Indefinite waiting (in camps and urban centres) and the resulting deterioration of livelihood options disproportionately affect those who are not or less connected.*
- *Female households chiefs and women whose relations and connections have been fractured en route are more prone to be affected by rising precarity than others.*

### 3.3 Following the networks—Connectivity and mobility in the context of protracted displacement

Forced displacement and migration are deeply embedded in the history of Eritrea. This section will show how protracted conflict and a long history of displacement has created a complex and dynamic web of transnational networks.

#### Eritreans' mobility history and intentions

Several decades of migration have created a large Eritrean diaspora mainly based in East Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America. Compared to the country's total population, estimated at six million, the Eritrean diaspora is also growing very fast. According to the Atlas of Migration, it grew from around 294,000 in 2005 to 752,000 in 2019 (European Union, 2020, p. 62). The decades of exodus have triggered and maintained a specific transnational orientation of Eritrean society that stands in stark contrast to the country's international isolation. Many Eritreans in the diaspora maintain strong links not only to their kin at home but also to Eritrea itself (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Bernal, 2006; Hirt, 2013). This has led to enduring and close economic, political and symbolic ties between those outside and inside Eritrea.

Translocality evolves through mobility, flows and interconnections. It is constituted in relational spaces that materialise through agents' everyday practice (Etzold et al., 2017, p. 53). Ethiopia is not only a place where many Eritreans live but also a place from where they embark on a longer migratory trajectory to reach final destinations (Horwood & Kate, 2016). In this situation, the camps became transit points, characterised by continuous comings and goings. New people move in while others leave. Eritreans move from refugee camps to nearby towns and cities within Ethiopia as soon as they can afford to do so. Tens of thousands of Eritreans have been using Ethiopia as a transit point. Since the late 2000s, they have been moving mainly to Europe through Sudan and Libya, the Central Mediterranean, or Sinai, Egypt, to Israel. Though it is difficult to estimate the actual number of people who travelled onward via these routes, a survey conducted in 2014 revealed that over 80 per cent of Eritrean refugees sheltered in Ethiopian camps stated that they had plans to move on (Samuel Hall, 2014).

Our own survey supports these findings yet also shows the significance of existing transnational networks for onward mobility: In total, 88 per cent of interviewed Eritrean refugees intend to move on to another place or country to live there in the

future. As general tendency, the share of those who wish to move on is slightly larger among refugees who live outside of camps (89%) compared to those living in camps (87%), larger among those living in cities (93%) than in rural areas (83%), larger among younger people (91% of those 30 years and younger) than among older refugees (65% of those older than 50 years), and significantly larger among the higher educated (93% of those with secondary or tertiary education) than among the less educated respondents (20% of those who completed primary school or are illiterate). For those who have existing ties to family members or friends outside of Ethiopia, the share is even higher (98%). Yet, 83% of those refugees who stated that their personal network does not extend beyond the current place of living also wish to migrate to another country if they had the means. According to our survey, Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany are the countries that the respondents would ideally like to move to.

While many plan to move on, surprisingly few (7%) of those we spoke to have actually tried to visit or move on to another country. Migrants encounter different kinds of obstacles, hurdles and barriers to their mobility aspirations. 70 per cent of the survey respondents stated that they had encountered diverse barriers to mobility, forcing them to abandon their migration plans or take irregular routes. While 94 per cent of the respondents mentioned difficulty to overcome visa and border restrictions as the most significant barrier to mobility, 62 per cent of the interviewed Eritreans highlighted the lack of financial means to cover transportation costs, particularly the high costs of services provided by smugglers or other agents of the migration industry. 50 per cent stated that they lack support from others for a journey of secondary migration.

Those who already experienced migration across multiple borders (besides the border crossing from Eritrea to Ethiopia) reported spending more time waiting for the next border crossing opportunity in cities and camps than actually being on the move. According to our informants, border crossings are based on complicated power dynamics involving local smugglers, the refugees, former migrants and relatives living in Europe, the United States or the Middle East and elsewhere who fund the journey. Cross-border mobility often depends on the access to support by family members, relatives and friends that live in different locations (cf. Belloni, 2016a). They exchange information continuously, share emotions and maintain a sense of belonging within a large network through calls and social media (see Section on Ruptures in connectivity and mobility).



## Translocal networks and mobility

All people are embedded in particular social figurations. Yet, the amount, quality and spatial expansion of network relations differ significantly between different groups (Etzold et al., 2019)—also between the Eritrean refugees we encountered in Ethiopia. Two out of three survey respondents said that they do not have significant network relations with anyone beyond their current place of living. As Figure 6 demonstrates, both the number and share of those who are only locally but not translocally connected is much higher among refugees who live in camps than those who live outside of camps. In the same vein, urban refugees have by far more translocal connections (i.e. to other places in Ethiopia) and are much more solidly embedded in transnational networks (i.e. having personal relations to persons outside of Ethiopia) than those living in rural areas. For instance, 83 per cent of urban refugees in Addis Ababa are transnationally connected. In comparison, only nine per cent of Afar refugees who live in Aysaita camp and only 13 per cent of Tigriyna who live in Mai Aini camp have these links to persons in other countries.

The quality and spatial scope of social networks play a significant role in all stages of displacement and migration. 81 per cent of all survey respondents stated that they did not have any support by others for crossing the border to Ethiopia. Among those 19 per cent who could rely on their networks for mobility, it was mostly the support by family members or other network contacts in third countries, followed by support from within Eritrea and by relatives already living in Ethiopia that helped to facilitate mobility. Our findings indicate that the existence of transnational networks before departure is certainly not a prerequisite for cross-border mobility to Ethiopia, while transnational connectivity can indeed pave the way for journeys to other countries of refuge.

This is even more evident for mobility after initial displacement. Our research shows that onward mobility from the camps is primarily determined by the refugees' network size and the quality of their connections. Networks enable refugees to move out of camps, secure livelihoods and widen future chances. Officially, as we discussed above, the out-of-camp policy (OCP) requires financial means to move out of camps and finance the cost of living in urban centres. Networks and connectivity facilitate and cover the cost of onward mobility to neighbouring countries, Europe and other destinations where network contacts live (see Figure 7). Irregular secondary migrations require networks and resources to find smugglers and cover smugglers' charges and costs of transportation. In the cities, networks help to cover the cost of onward mobility, provide information about job opportunities, support integration, get business licenses and cover costs of living.

**Figure 6: Survey respondents' personal networks beyond their place of living**

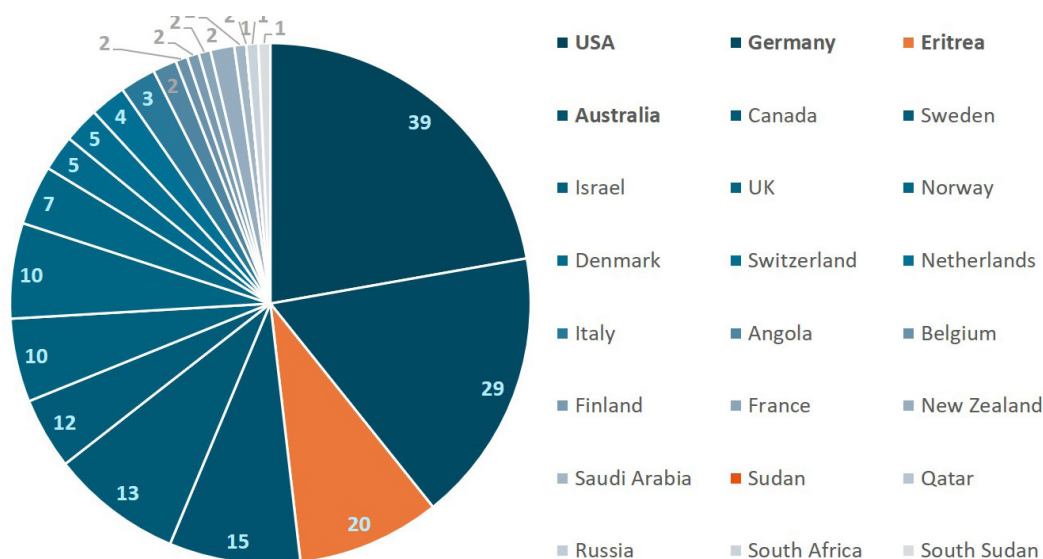


Source: TRAFIG survey data, n=394

Networks and connections do not always provide the assistance needed to move to the aspired destination. Especially women, children and elderly people are in precarious positions. Most stories have in common that men (help to) plan, organise and put mobility into action. Women, elderly people, persons with disabilities and children are therefore especially affected by problems connected to a lack of financial resources or social connectivity.

The quality of connectivity varies greatly. The amount of assistance that a network can provide depends on the situation of the persons that constitute the network at a given point in time. Family members provide the most assistance as compared to friends and acquaintances, as the following statement shows:

Figure 7: Countries in which Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia have personal contacts



Source: TRAFIG survey data, n=137 (only those who have connections beyond Ethiopia; 252 persons stated that they have no connections beyond their place of living) Note: Sequence of countries clockwise, starting with USA, Germany, Eritrea, Australia, etc.

*When we arrived, we were four. Each of us paid US \$1,500 for a smuggler up to the Ethiopian border.(...) One had a US visa. He had to come to Ethiopia because he could not get an exit visa as he did not finish his national service. (...) he left in less than two months. One had a brother in Germany and left through Libya shortly. The other one also had a sister in Sweden and left through Libya as well. (...) I was the only one who had no close relative abroad. However, thanks to God, I also have cousins in Juba, Canada and the US who support my survival and pay my kids' school fees" (Sint-AAU-FA-001-ETH).*

Those who have links to the cities' social and economic networks and those who have external resources to rely on are more mobile than refugees who have no such resources at all. Others who have access to resources move quickly. Some move on within days of arrival in the camp. For such refugees, the refugee camps are transit spaces where arrangements for onward travel to the cities are made. Their time in the camps revolves around visiting UNHCR and ARRA offices to obtain papers. While talking about this situation, a longtime camp resident jokingly explained: "Those who arrive these days are stylish and classy. They are bringing their suitcases and equipment, and all of this. And they move on quickly—the newcomers are more like tourists actually" (Bint-AAU-Mu-020-ETH). The refugees with well-established connections abroad often arrive with pre-arranged travel plans. Various refugees explained that many of their friends and companions were able to leave the camps due to the financial support provided through transnational networks. In general, all respondents agreed that the financial capacity of the network determines the pathways of refugees.

The following example of Yordanos and her family ties illustrates how multiple connections between migrants, ex-migrants, and non-migrants facilitate material exchange and flow of knowledge and thus displaced people's mobility. Having strong network relationships with several people at various places lowers the cost and risks of movement and increases the possibility of further movements. Yordanos' case also shows how the family's previous migration history was significant in each individual's mobility. In reaching their current destinations, the family members established socio-spatial connections in-between, which further broadened and diversified their social networks. Yordanos was able to draw on the relationships already established to enable and ensure her onward mobility.

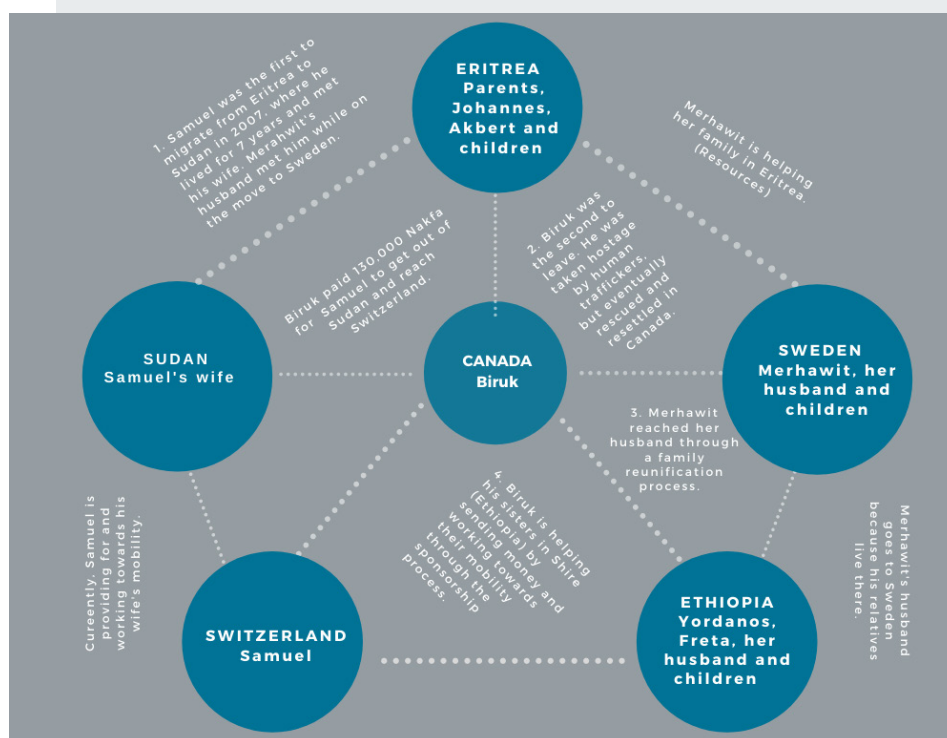
The example also illustrates how the level of displaced people's mobility increases in the process of being mobile. Moving broadens the respective social networks and allows refugees to explore opportunities and thus, in turn, facilitate further mobility. As the family's social networks expanded and diversified, the pre-departure figuration also transformed. In this family story told by Yordanos, Biruk's success in getting support from a charity and resettling in Canada made him central in facilitating the family's new global figuration. His success opened opportunities for his brothers' and sisters' mobility, and this continues to expand. However, plans can also not succeed. The one person on whom rested all (financial) responsibility might fail to succeed or even die en route taking down the family's hopes.

### Box 5: Yordanos' family history

Yordanos is a 20-year-old woman who is living in Shire. Her family consists of seven siblings, Johannes (m), Samuel (m), Freta (f), Akbert (f), Merhawit (f), Biruk (m) and Yordanos (f)—from oldest to youngest.

Samuel was the first to move out. He is 38 years old, ranks second in the birth order and left Eritrea through Sudan in 2007. Once he had arrived there, Samuel did not have anyone who could support him to continue his journey. As a result, he had to stay in Sudan for seven years. He only reached Switzerland, where he lives now, after receiving support from his younger brother, Biruk, who had, in the meantime, made it to Canada—even though he had left home a few years after Samuel. In 2012, Biruk, now 28 and the sixth in the birth order, escaped Eritrea through Sudan with his friends. Before they entered Sudan, they were caught by human traffickers who took them hostage and led them to Sinai in Egypt. Subsequently, their family in Eritrea was asked to pay 150,000 nakfas (equiv-

alent to US \$10,000). They did all they could and were able to pay the required amount of money. However, the traffickers asked for an additional 1.5 million nakfas. As they were only able to raise 600,000 nakfas, Biruk was detained and spent two months in their hands. After this agonising time, a charity helped to get him released and facilitated his transfer to Cairo. After staying there for two years, he got resettled to Canada. While in Canada, he paid 130,000 nakfas for his brother Samuel who was stranded in Sudan and helped him reach Switzerland from Sudan via Libya and Italy crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Merhawit, the fifth in the family line, was the third to move to Sweden. Her journey was, nevertheless, different from that of her brothers. She left the country legally through a family reunification process to join her husband. As she had completed her national service duty, she could leave the country legally and went to Sweden. She was, however, not allowed to take all of her



Source: Own empirical data

children—those older than five years old had to stay. Merhawit was only allowed to take the youngest. The rest of her children, 12, 13, and 14 years old, joined them later through irregular routes via Sudan and Ethiopia.

Merhawit's husband fled to Sudan in 2014. There, he met Samuel, her brother and stayed with him for a couple of months. Her husband was able to move on within a year because of his family abroad. At the time, nine of his siblings lived overseas, most of them in Europe and Israel. They were, therefore, able to support him on his journey from Sudan to Sweden.

Yordanos, who was serving in the military in Eritrea and the youngest sister, fled to Shire, Ethiopia, in June 2018. Sixth months later, her sister Freta, the third-born of the family, followed her along with her husband and their two children. In Shire, both sisters received support through Merhawit's in-laws who helped them move out of the camp and live in a rented house. Yordanos' and her sister's choice of destination were still primarily based on the fact that their brother Biruk lived in Canada. Shortly after the research team left Shire in March 2020, Yordanos' sponsorship paper from her brother arrived.

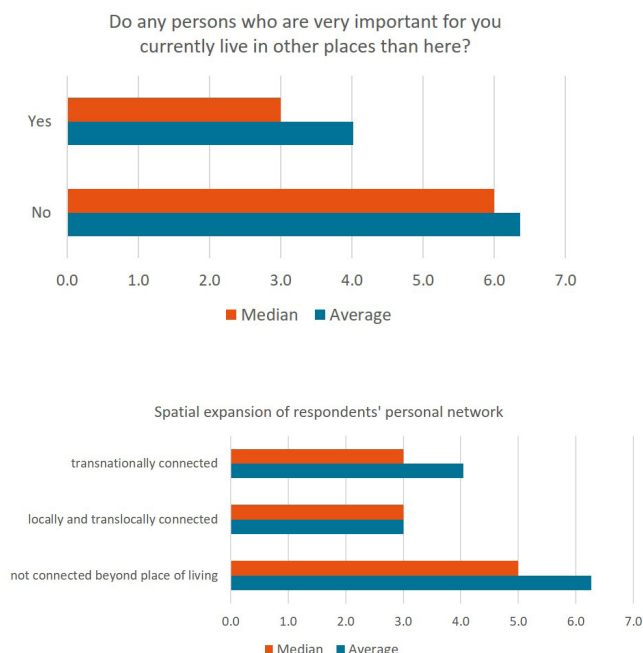
Their parents, their 34-year-old sister Akbert, the fourth-born, and the 40-year-old and eldest brother Johannes still live in Eritrea. Both are married and have children of their own. They also aspire to move out of the country with their families in the future. However, the family decided to support Yordanos first and then her sister. The preference for Yordanos was based on the fact that she was single and did not need as much support on her way as a family would.

Though scattered and living in different parts of the world, the family shares responsibilities and resources. Her brother in Canada is mainly in charge of Yordanos and Freta along with Freta's family; his responsibility ranges from sending money to facilitating the sponsorship process. Samuel, the brother in Switzerland, mainly provides for and works towards his wife's mobility—whom he met while in Sudan and later married. However, he also supports the parents and, sporadically, his siblings. His sister Merhawit who lives in Sweden, primarily provides for her own children but also helps her parents and siblings (Bint-AAU-MG-028-ETH).

## Ruptures in connectivity and mobility

Immobility, i.e. being confined in the camps or being stuck in informal precarious conditions in urban areas, conversely hinders refugees from exploring opportunities. Our results indicate that both trends reinforce each other over time. This means that those who had been stuck in a refugee camp for extended periods often had to cope with decreasing options of moving on—which led to remarkable high levels of frustration. Those who were already relatively mobile often saw their options of mobility increase over time—though the time spent in transit was often considerable. Overall, our survey findings clearly indicate that refugees without network connections beyond the current place of living are much more likely to live in protracted displacement (Figure 8): On average, refugees who are embedded in transnational figurations have lived in displacement for four years, while those whose networks are locally bound are in a protracted situation for six years. This can be interpreted in two ways: First, those who are transnationally connected move out of displacement quicker; second, recent arrivals are better transnationally connected than the previous ones, like Yordanos in the case discussed above.

**Figure 8: Duration of displacement (in years since departure) in relation to connections beyond the place of living**



Source: TRAFIG survey data, n=394

Integrating themselves in several places of origin, transit and arrival—displaced people develop not only dense relationships but also experienced ruptures. On the one hand, the interviewed displaced persons recounted how they established new trans-local networks, sought to keep up ties with their contacts and maintain relationships with their place of origin. On the other,

they also frequently mentioned frictions or ruptures on all these levels. The economic stress of displacement and the fragmented nature of clandestine journeys have a considerable impact on family and other social ties. According to our survey, almost one-third of Eritrean refugees had been involuntarily separated from their family on their journeys, while 18 per cent had split up on purpose for strategic reasons.

The following case illustrates how dynamic the displacement process is and how close forced movements' success and failure are. Akberet, who lives in Hitsats camp with her nine-year-old daughter, is an example of a life-changing rupture resulting in gendered vulnerability:

*I have neither a family member nor a distant relative abroad. I left Eritrea on the advice of my former husband who was by then in Malta. He cut every communication with me after my arrival here. He sent us money once from Malta and stopped every communication with us. I come from a peasant family. My parents are now old, and my two brothers are in the military [Eritrean]. My only sister arrived two months ago, and she is now living with me in this shelter (...). I am in my fifth year in this shelter, and many people joined me in this room and most of them have left [moved on and resettled], whereas I have never gone beyond Shire (Sint-AAU-FA-005-ETH).*

Women such as Akberet and Mihret (below) are vulnerable in many ways: Often, ruptures come unexpectedly and affect their well-being. The feeling of loneliness combined with various structural disadvantages that women in Ethiopia have to cope with lead to more profound poverty than ever before (cf. 4.1).

### Box 6: Impact of ruptured connectivity

*Mihret, a single mother with two children, got separated from her husband on the move. She fled to Ethiopia in 2013 for the first time with her husband, an ex ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) fighter, leaving their firstborn with her mother. Back then, they were taken to Hitsats refugee camp. After a year, her husband wanted to leave Ethiopia, and Mihret did not mind as long as they stayed together. Her husband, who had relatives overseas who supported him, was eager to leave Ethiopia as quickly as possible. He did not want to leave five-months-pregnant Mihret behind and took her with him to Sudan. On their way to Sudan, they were taken hostage by human traffickers.*

*I was in the fifth month of my pregnancy. They [Sudanese traffickers] asked us to pay them 40,000 nakfas (US \$2,666). Those who had had the money paid and continued their journey. Those of us who could not afford to pay were taken to Khartoum and sold to an Eritrean [trafficker] for 60,000 nakfas. My husband's siblings*



*covered the fee for him. (...) But I had had nothing, neither brothers nor sisters. (...) They [her husband's siblings] were not willing to cover mine. As a result, my husband left me in Sudan and moved to Italy. (...) I could not get a person who would be able to cover the 60,000 nakfas. (...) The human trafficker threatened that he would sell me. He told me that it was not his fault but my husband's."*

*In the end, Mihert was fortunate to escape after weeks of captivity. But she found herself in a precarious situation. She was sick and had a miscarriage. With financial help from Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in Sudan, she was able to return to Eritrea. After her return, Mihert recounts that she could neither find relief nor happiness and faced considerable economic and political hurdles. She fled again with the support of a smuggler who locked her up and raped her for months. Mihert managed to run away and again returned to Eritrea.*

*In Eritrea, she found out that she was pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. However, she did not dare to speak about what she had encountered during her journey. Today she recapitulates:*

*Life became tough for me; I have undergone many torments. Amidst these, God has brought this peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea. As peace prevailed, I told my mother that I would go to Ethiopia with my kids. So I did (Bint-AAU-MG-007-ETH).*

Social disarticulation, as in Mihert's story, is common among the displaced population. Survivors hardly get psychological support, and their traumata are exacerbated by the socio-economic conditions common to protracted displacement situations. They have to negotiate anxieties and ambivalences daily while trying to stay afloat. Mihert, being a single mother, is forced to support her kids doing domestic chores for better-off refugees inside the camp. She deplored not being able to maintain social relationships with other refugees and locals due to a lack of time and resources. Those who would need most to expand their connections to raise support are deprived of this opportunity by the very condition they need to overcome. Stranded single mothers, in particular, are neither able to maintain previously established connections nor to create desperately needed new ones. Instead, they often remain immobilised either in camps or cities, in precarious circumstances, waiting in limbo for an indefinite time.

## Concluding remarks

A long history of forced displacement and migration has created a complex and dynamic web of transnational Eritrean networks. Our findings illustrate how a lack of connectivity restrains the range of movements—or, vice versa, how connectivity facilitates multiple connections between migrants, ex-migrants and non-migrants. As mobility requires resources, the amount of assistance the network provides is crucial to move on and eventually achieve the aspirations that motivated individuals to leave Eritrea.

Our research found that family members provide the most important part of assistance, followed by support from friends and acquaintances. Those who have links to the cities' social and economic networks and those who have external resources to rely on, in particular transnational connections, are more mobile than refugees who lack such resources. In other words, families' previous history of migration is a major factor for the type of mobility and destination. We also found that those who have such a family history and access to resources moved on quickly. Some of them moved on within days of arrival in a camp. For such refugees, the camps are transit spaces where they make arrangements for onward travel to the cities. Immobility, conversely, is often a sign of a lack of networks, keeps refugees in camps and constrains them from exploring livelihood opportunities.

## Key findings

- *Protracted displacement did not only result in immobilization, decreased livelihoods, and increased vulnerability, but also a complex and dynamic web of transnational networks that opened up new options, opportunities and migration pathways.*
- *The capacity to break out of limbo and move forward is not only determined by each refugee's networks, but foremost the quality of that networks in availing necessary financial resources.*
- *Ruptures en route causing unexpected immobility and vulnerabilities are often related to families' previous history of migration. The ability to provide the assistance needed to move to the aspired destination is nevertheless often fluctuating.*

### 3.4 Building alliances across communities

Eritrean refugee interactions with host communities take place in different contexts. These are determined by a range of factors, such as historical experiences, ethnicity and the political and economic environments. In this section, we will discuss the different contexts that shape refugee–host interactions, refugees' interaction and integration with their hosts and the role local networks play in securing refugees' livelihoods.

#### Contexts of local interactions and integration

As discussed in the section Governing the influx of Eritrean refugees, the border opening following the recent peace deal resulted in a new influx of refugees that exceeded the camps' capacity. Thus, ARRA and UNHCR allowed refugees with financial resources to rent rooms outside the camps causing the host communities in smaller towns to complain about a hike in prices on rental houses, food, and other services caused by the refugees' presence. In Shire and Mai Tsebri, daily labourers, students, and government employees complained that they were unable to cope with the cost of living in the areas with a high number of refugees. Seemingly paradoxical, similar complaints were also raised by refugees who lived in the camps for an extended period of time and pointed out that the new arrivals were better connected and received more remittances from relatives abroad.

There are significant differences between camps and urban contexts. As discussed above, the refugee camps are situated in environments where the refugees and the hosts share ethnicity, language, religion, ways of life and cultural practices. The fact that the host and refugee communities share a common language, culture, and religion are enabling factors for interactions. However, the recent political histories across the border play crucial roles in shaping the interactions and the extents of solidarity between the refugees and hosts communities. This has created differences in the refugee–host communities' interactions among the Afar, Tigrinya and Kunama.

The Tigrinya and the Tigrayans (Tigrinya speakers from Tigray state) share a common ethnicity, language and cultural practices and fought on a common front against the Ethiopian central government until 1991. The two groups have dominated the political, economic and socio-cultural landscape in each country since then. The Tigrinya have dominated politics in Eritrea since the war of independence. In Ethiopia, too, the Tigrayans led by the TPLF played a significant role in defeating the former military regime. Since then, they dominated the Ethiopian political and economic domains until the change of government in 2018 that brought Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in 2018. Nevertheless, the two fought a bloody border war between 1998 and 2000, in which around one hundred thousand people died and tens of thousands faced deporta-

tion from both sides of the borders. As a result, many harbour grudges and suspicions against one another. In other words, the ethnocultural commonality between the two has been overshadowed by the animosity and suspicion created politically.

The Afar and the Kunama, on the other hand, are political minorities in Eritrea and Ethiopia. They consider themselves victims of political marginality. Yet, there are also significant demographic and political differences between the Afar and Kunama in Ethiopia. While the Afar are a population of over 1.4 million and 'self-administer' themselves in Afar regional state, the Kunama are a small population of less than four thousand (0.07% of Tigray region) (CSA, 2007). Afar and Kunama refugees are received and hosted by their co-ethnic groups who feel sympathetic towards them because of ethnic and language commonality and their shared history of being victimised by the ethnic Tigrinya (cf. footnote 7 for terminology). Eritrean Afar and Kunama blame the Tigrinya in Eritrea for being in part responsible for the conditions they fled from. From the perspective of a discriminated group, both do not differentiate between Tigrinya speakers on either side of the border, grouping Tigrinya speakers into one faction because of similar inter-group relations with them. These joint experiences overlay possible intra-group differences, which Kunama and Afar often acknowledge.

The natural and social environment of interaction between the refugees and hosts is also different (see map on page 8). The Tigrinya, who come mainly from highland Eritrea (Anseba region, Debub region and Maekel region with Eritrea's capital Asmara, see map on p. 8), are relatively urbanised and educated. In Tigray, they are received close to small towns with less or no agricultural activity. Most of the out-of-camp beneficiaries are Tigrinya. The Afar, are primarily herders and come from eastern arid lowland (southern region). They come to an environment of pastoral life in the Afar region of Ethiopia. The Kunama come from the western lowland area of Gash Barka, a fertile agricultural area where they engaged in agriculture and livestock herding activities. Shiraro district, where they are hosted, is also a relatively fertile agricultural area in Tigray, enabling them to continue with some of their traditional livelihood activities.

#### Refugee–host interactions and integration

One of the most significant social interactions between the camp-based refugees and the host communities take place during weekly markets outside the camps in nearby towns. In Mai Tsebri, a small town situated between Adi Harush and Mai Aini camps, refugees and residents regularly interact during the weekly market. Semira, a local from the hosting community who owns a shop in the market, for example, interacts with many refugees who buy from her. Her customers range from those who do their daily shopping to refugees who purchase different commodities for their retail shops inside the camps.

Semira mentions that their relationship is characterised by interaction and trust: *“I never faced any troubles with them. So far, they always came and paid me back.”* She gives the refugees goods worth up to around 2,000 birr (approx. US \$60) on credit, which they pay when they receive their monthly ration or remittance (Sint-AAU-MG-017-ETH).

Language, cultural and religious similarities also encourage individuals to interact and communicate. The strength of alliances and trust, such as that between Semira and her refugee customers, build on the frequency and variety of interactions. They are stronger in contexts where the camps are situated close to the settlement of host communities. Hitsats, Adi Harush, Berhale and Aysaita camps are within walking distance from smaller towns, while Mai Aini camp is farther away. Shimelba is located in an isolated rural area and far from any urban centre. Refugees of the four more connected camps have more options for exchange with the host communities than those from the more remote locations. The case of Abraha, who runs a small business in Adi Harush camp, is a good example. He narrated his story as follows:

*I was trained as a metal worker in the Eritrean military. I escaped from the military service in 2010 and set up my own workshop in peri-urban Asmara. I worked there for four years until I was caught by the police. I was imprisoned for three months. When I managed to escape again, I decided to leave (...). I arrived here in 2015. Just two weeks after my arrival, I went out and looked for a metal workshop. There was only one small workshop in Mai Tsebri town. I asked them whether I could help them, which they accepted. That helped me to prove my skill to them. They liked my skill very much and even introduced me to people in other towns up to 50 km away. Now, the owner of that workshop is the godfather of my son. We are a family. Now, I work in the camp and outside the camp. From the money I made, I established this café<sup>15</sup> (...). So far, nobody has asked me for a work permit (Bint-AAU-FA-019-ETH).*

The shared language and culture emboldened Abraha to look for a job just two weeks after his arrival. The proximity to a semi-urban centre with a metal workshop set the ground for his economic integration. The economic relationship transcended into the cultural and personal sphere when the owner of the metal workshop became his son's godfather. While Abraha is aware of generalised prejudices and suspicions on the political level, as discussed above, he separates these from interactions and friendships on the individual level. Abraha complains that some Tigrayan used to call him *Sha'abia*<sup>16</sup> at the metal work-

shop instead of his name. This made him feel uncomfortable. Eritrean refugees and Tigrayan hosts who are on good terms typically try to avoid talking about politics. Before the current conflict between the central and the regional government in Tigray, the biggest challenge for local integration was, however, not related to local politics, but to find the necessary guarantor. On the one hand, this process often transcended ethnic, age or gender divisions and was observed to be highly individualistic (see section 3.5). On the other, these factors still largely determine the likelihood of building up personal relationships that are necessary to establish a livelihood. Especially before policy reform and the peace deal of 2018, the restriction on camps was so tight that very few managed to leave, look for jobs and integrate. Girmay (see below) is one of those who against all odds managed to establish local networks and win the solidarity of the local host community.

Interpersonal relationships are vital if one wants to showcase one's skill and eke out income beyond the monthly rations provided in camps. Girmay is a Tigrinya-speaking young Eritrean refugee, married with two children, who lived in Adi Harush camp for almost a decade. He used to work as a tailor while attending school before he left Eritrea. Once he had settled in Adi-Harush refugee camp, he started working as a waiter for two years in a small tea shop owned by a local Ethiopian in the nearby town of Mai Tsebri. Girmay remembers the situation: *“It was a tough time. The payment was very little. It was not easy to live on. On top of that, the refugee law was stringent.”* He had to walk from the refugee camp to his workplace every day, and at times spent nights hiding at his workplace. His acquaintances and contacts established during his work as a waiter in Mai Tsebri put him in touch with more people from the local community, enabling him to explore other opportunities. Local tailors, whom he got to know while working as a waiter, were replacing their manual tailoring machine with an electric one. Girmay took the opportunity and asked whether he could rent the manual tailoring machine. Since there was no electricity in the camp, he preferred a manual machine.

In collaboration with a refugee friend, Girmay rented the machine for 300 birr per month and started to work in shifts with him. Until his friend left the camp via Libya to Italy about three years ago, both had paid the rental fee together. Besides the money he had earned repairing and making clothes for the last seven years, the ration he received played a significant role. Without it, he would probably not cover his expenses, including his food and other monthly expenditures. With the ration, though, he can provide for his family. Girmay holds that the opportunity to get a tailoring machine arose because of his close contact with the hosting community. According to him, maintaining a good refugee–host relationship is essential to resolve

<sup>15</sup> Abraha runs a café inside Adi Harush refugee camp. Many refugees run small businesses inside camps, without being required to get work permits and paying taxes.

<sup>16</sup> *Sha'abia* is an Arabic term for Eritrean People's Liberation Front (ruling party in Eritrea).



livelihood needs. It increased his capacity to explore and secure alternative livelihood options even though his mobility outside the camp was limited because of the higher level of restrictions. As another benefit of his alliances, he managed to get a loan for goods enabling him to open a small shop in the refugee camp that brings in more revenues for his family (Sint-AAU-MG-011-ETH).

## Role of local networks for securing livelihoods

In Shimelba camp, which is in a relatively fertile agricultural north-western part of Tigray, the relationship between refugees and hosts is mainly built around sharecropping. The Kunama who have been stranded in the camp for over fifteen years now are mainly from an agricultural background. They contribute their labour and agricultural skills and plough the host community's land in sharecropping arrangements. Sharecropping is a familiar custom among the hosts and refugees that started long before displacement. As a result of the amicable relation and long stay in the camp, many refugees own livestock that are grazing on the land of the host communities.

While no survey interviews were conducted with the Kunama in and around Shimelba camp, it is striking to see that almost three out of four (73%) of the refugees in Afar stated that they feel accepted by the locals and only 17 per cent felt rejected. This rate of self-perceived acceptance, which indicates successful local integration and greater social cohesion, is much higher than the 20 per cent of refugees who feel accepted in Tigray. Our qualitative interviews in Afar underscore this finding. The Afar refugees in camps, settlements and rural out-of-camps sites have made multiple arrangements with the local hosting communities. In contrast to the Kunama, very few have managed to continue to herd livestock after arriving in Ethiopia. The condition of the pastoralist groups that often have to start with very few animals or none at all remains dire. Some, like in the Dalol settlement close to the border with Eritrea, barely have any livelihood options besides weaving mats, which also depends on local solidarity. Muna, a female Afar Eritrean refugee described this solidarity as follows:

*Those who have land allow us to take grass from it without any problem. We meet them [the hosts] when we go to cut and collect wood, and there we ask them if we can take grass, and they agree. The people here share everything they have. They cannot afford to help us like an organisation because they do not have the resources (...). They help us with everything they can (Sint-AAU-MG-033-ETH).*

Clan membership is a clear line of separation between the Afar. But beyond this level—as hosts, refugees, NGO workers and state officials continued to emphasise—the rule is: “Afar is Afar”. Aisha, 21 years old, married with a two-year-old daughter, explains:

*“Some Afar who want to do business, like my father, go to the woreda<sup>17</sup> to get a work permit and an ID. He is a clan leader, and he has lived with the Afar community, so he does not have any problems finding a job. As long as you are Afar, there is no problem. It does not matter whether you are Eritrean or Ethiopian” (Bint-AAU-MG-031-ETH).*

According to this interview with Aisha, her father managed to get a work permit before the new policy came into place. The ID card she mentioned is not a refugee ID card, but one Ethiopian citizens get. Registered as members of a kebele with an ID card, especially in such peripheral border areas where they share the same language, refugees enjoy all citizens' rights. This proves how local relations and factors like ethnicity, language, social organisations (kinship), and the political set up matter for refugee–host communities' relationships.

In cities such as Shire, Mekelle and the capital Addis Ababa, refugee–host relationships are relatively robust, mutual and informal. However, the greater sense of anonymity in a large city might also contribute to the fact that only a comparatively low share of urban refugees (8%) feel accepted by others in Addis Ababa's neighbourhoods (for comparison, the total average of perceived acceptance by locals is 31%). Nonetheless, multiple interactions inevitably take place between Eritrean refugees and host community members. Together with the shared language, culture, and history, these local network contacts allowed some refugees to navigate significant obstacles to their livelihoods. With their large markets, cities provide more alternative livelihood opportunities than small towns or the camps themselves. Prospects to generate some income depend mainly on networks—local and transnational—that open opportunities for informal employment. Addis offers better chances to find ways around restrictions, but there is little humanitarian support. Tekeste, a thirty-year-old refugee who lives in Gofa Mebrathayil condominium houses, has been in Addis Ababa since 2013. He survives on the remittance he occasionally receives from his cousins who live in South Sudan, Switzerland, America and Canada. He explains:

*I am dependent on remittances from my cousins. I opened a bar having saved the small amount of money I periodically receive from them to be at least gradually self-*

17 In Ethiopian administrative structure *woreda* is equivalent to district. The administrative structure is organized from top to bottom as follows: Federal/central government-regional government-zonal administration-*woreda* administration and *kebele* administration.

*reliant. Imagine, until when should I depend on them? A man I met here who has become a good friend got me a business license under his name. I agreed to pay him some money every month. After working smoothly for two years, he increased the monthly payment several times in a year. Then, we disagreed, and I was forced to stop the business (Sint-AAU-FA-001-ETH).*

Tekeste's case shows that local interactions and networks created through persons encountered randomly resulted in a friendship that had supported his efforts to be self-reliant in an urban setting regardless of the eventual disagreement between him and his Ethiopian friend over different expectations.

## Concluding remarks

In this section, we discussed the vital importance of context in Eritrean refugees' interactions with the host communities. The three groups of Eritrean refugees have different political, socio-economic and demographic contexts that affect inter-personal, economic and cultural interactions at the local level. In general, commonalities are crucial in establishing interactions at individual or family levels. Among Afar and Kunama, where there is no political animosity across the border as among the Tigrinya, the commonalities compounded by experiences of victimhood and social organisations such as kinship shape solidarities among refugees and hosts. The Kunama were not able to garner similar benefits from their hosts as the Afar as their number in the host region was too small. The Afar who dominated the Afar regional state provided the Afar refugees with generous local support and facilitated local integration based on the clan order. In all cases, local solidarity helped the refugees, to varying extents, to cope with protracted displacement situations or even to achieve de facto local integration.

### Key findings

- *Historical antecedents, inter-ethnic relations, and current political respective economic context are factors that crucially shape and condition refugee–host interactions.*
- *Socio-cultural communalities usually facilitate interactions at the level of individuals and households, lower barriers for local integration, and facilitates mutually beneficial cooperations.*
- *Political solidarities by the host communities, compounded by socio-cultural communalities not only support and foster refugee livelihoods but also help to counter restrictive central government policies.*

### 3.5 Seizing opportunities: Incentives for new economic interactions

In recent years the public and academic debate on refugees and durable solutions, has witnessed a shift from understanding the refugees as victims without agency who have to be nourished and protected—a perspective that resulted in a care and maintenance approach—to understanding refugees as entrepreneurs who bring in new ideas and dynamics for local economic development (Betts & Collier, 2015; Crisp, 2016; Papademetriou & Fratzke, 2016; Sanghi et al., 2016). According to our research findings, both are true: Protracted displacement situations are humanitarian emergencies that increase individual vulnerabilities—and the persons affected show remarkable resilience.

#### Development incentives and refugee economies in camp areas

According to an informant, Tigrayan authorities were well aware that the presence of refugees could potentially bring economic stimulus for the host communities when they established the camps in areas considered economic backwater of the region:

*When a camp was established around Mai Tsebri, the surrounding community opposed it. Then, top officials of the region came and discussed with the community. They said, “we thoughtfully selected this area for the camps to benefit the local community. Refugee camps will transform this locality, which is underdeveloped and does not have many resources, through different development projects that will target the refugees (Sint-AAU-FA-021-ETH).*

Residents interviewed in Mai Tsebri said that the town has benefitted a lot from the refugee camps. Mai Aini and Adi Harush camps together have been hosting over 50,000 refugees for over ten years. This large number of refugees created a market. Especially after the restrictions on their mobility out of camps were loosened, refugees became active consumers in the nearby towns. Many entrepreneurs have come to the area following the establishments of the camps and built structures such as business centres, shops, hotels, bars, and internet cafés. Because of the refugees several, mostly international, aid organisations came to the area and contributed to the locality’s development, such as hotels for their staff.

As a result, the economic activities in the town have picked up considerably. The town, which was just a village a decade ago, has seen commercial development with booming infrastructure and service sectors. Transportation infrastructures, schools and health facilities have been built from scratch. These developments have a direct impact on the economy and livelihood of the host community. Samira, who is a resident and a shop owner in Mai Tsebri town, attributes the improvement of her business

and the economic situation in the town in general to the refugees’ presence:

*Those who sold Siwa [home-brewed local beer] before the establishment of the camp have now improved and developed to selling beer in their pubs. The women who had a small drinking house before have now shifted to a better business. Those who were running small shops now have big and well-organised shops. They have really changed (Sint-AAU-MG-017-ETH).*

There is a similar local perception concerning the economic potentials linked to the presence of refugees in Hitsats. Jemal, a returnee from Saudi Arabia and originally from Adigrat (about 180 km away) moved to Hitsats town exactly because a refugee camp was close by (Sint-AAU-FA-010-ETH). According to him, with the establishment of the camp, many business persons moved to the area to benefit from the opportunities created through the opening of the refugee camp (Sint-AAU-FA-010-ETH). He now owns a shop and counts many refugees amongst his customers. Hitsats town, which was also built from scratch with the establishment of the camp, is now flourishing, according to its residents (Sint-AAU-FA-010-ETH)<sup>18</sup>.

#### Joint ventures of refugees and host communities

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (see section 3.1) focuses on the host community for the first time resulting in increased benefits. According to the CRRF, any social service provided by UNHCR and partner organisations must provide extra services, 25 per cent for the host community and 75 per cent for refugees (Atrafi, 2017). The new Ethiopian refugee proclamation (Proclamation 1110/2019) supports such emphasis on the refugees and host communities. In line with this, host community members have recently benefited from health, educational, and other facilities provided to the refugees. Development initiatives by UNHCR and donor agencies aligned to the CRRF have been in progress in areas where local resources such as water and land can be relatively easily accessed for use. Currently, development incentives from the World Bank, UNHCR- FAO Collaboration Framework, and UNICEF target the refugee-hosting regions of Tigray, Afar, Somali, Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz and Addis Ababa. While the projects in other regions have already started, progress in Tigray has been slow due to disputes over refugee governance between the central and regional government in the last two years.

<sup>18</sup> In Tigray, it was clearly observable how host communities took advantage of the presence of refugees to commercialise their different goods and services with refugees. In other areas, like Gambella, it is estimated that hundreds of small businesses were created including retail shops, bakeries and tea rooms and others have been established since the beginning of the refugees’ arrival. Different NGOs have been distributing cash and material support to beneficiaries in refugee camps that helped to improve livelihoods and businesses throughout the region (Yonas, 2014; Endalkachew, 2016).

In Afar, a mostly arid and comparatively economically underdeveloped region, cooperation or alliances between the refugees and the host community come about mostly via the clan-based kinship system. A farmers' cooperative founded by 15 refugees in Aysaita initiated a joint venture to produce cotton. Wanting to expand, they found 28 host community members who own 28 hectares of land and who were ready to join the cooperative by contributing their land. Mekane Yesus, a non-government organisation (NGO), that had already piloted such a joint venture with another group of refugees and hosts helped to organise the start-up. Mohammed is an Eritrean Afar who fled to Ethiopia with his family seven years ago and one of the members of the cotton joint venture. Currently, he lives in Aysaita refugee camp. According to him, the biggest hurdle for the project was to raise the start capital: *"You cannot start [such] a business if you do not have any capital to start with,"* he explained (Sint-AAU-MG-040-ETH).

Mohammed joined the group with the money he made as a day labourer and with what he had saved before: *"I had money that I had saved after coming to Ethiopia and working in any job I could find. I would work [in] anything"* (Sint-AAU-MG-040-ETH). After an agreement was found with the landowners, the NGO supported the cotton cooperative with ploughs, cottonseed, and pesticides. The refugees invested another 300,000 birr (US \$9,000) mainly as payment for additional workers. In March 2020, after working on the land for six months, the cotton had grown well, the first harvest was collected and piled up, and negotiations with buyers advanced. All signs indicated that previous seasons' results that had brought in a considerable amount of additional cash to the community would be met. The international NGOs in the area praised the project as a successful role model.

The project is one of many examples that show how the arrival of refugees has changed the way of life for the locals to the better. Locals have profited from the presence of international NGOs, new jobs, new infrastructure and new ideas on methods of farming. The cooperative members' entrepreneurship benefits themselves, the members of the host community and fellow refugees. Mohammed explained how the cooperation functions and which role hosts play:

*Once we finish our work, we share the profit with the owners of the land. Even though they do not work for it, they get the money because it is their land. We have to give them 15 per cent from 100 per cent of our earnings* (Sint-AAU-MG-040-ETH).

In a context where the labour market offers minimal opportunities, the project offers refugees and host community members new jobs. Female refugees in Aysaita, for example, usually only produce and sell traditional palm frond mats. With the extra income generated by the sharecrop initiative, they can now augment the meagre ration provided in the camps, which, in turn, is benefitting Afar refugees who are not registered there. This case illustrates that

international debates on the resilience versus vulnerability of refugees are misleading. Our findings show that displaced persons do not only and continuously depend on aid—they are resilient and have developed coping strategies. In other words, aid and local resilience in combination help to lower the level of vulnerability.

## Urban refugee economies and development opportunities in Ethiopia

Over 20,000 Eritrean refugees have been granted out-of-camp (OCP) benefits since 2010. As of 2020, the OCP beneficiaries are no longer expected to present a guarantor. However, officially, those entitled to OCP are expected to be self-reliant and forfeit all logistical support from UNHCR/ARRA. Nevertheless, most of them use this entitlement to circumvent the constraints that camp life puts on them. For instance, several refugees who are beneficiaries of OCP we interviewed had started small businesses such as bars and shops in Addis Ababa. They started these businesses using the registration/licenses of their friends or distant relatives who are Ethiopian citizens. They make informal arrangements with these citizens and pay for their service.

However, these arrangements often end in disputes due to diverging expectations like in Tekeste's case (see section Role of local networks for securing livelihoods). Or like Michael, one of the urban refugees who got permission to stay in the capital because he could find a family member as a guarantor. Michael stated that this person expected some money in return. He used to live with his guarantor, but after some time, when Michael could no longer pay him, this person wanted him to move out. Michael was lucky to meet a stranger at a jebena coffee house by chance who asked about his problem. Finally, he offered Michael a small house to live in.

Such accounts show case the degree to which refugees attempt to circumvent the constraints by the governance regime. These challenges show the urgency and crucial importance of implementing the revised proclamation (Proclamation 1110/2019). Contrary to the widely held assumptions that urban refugees take jobs and markets off the host, recent studies reveal that they can contribute to host economies in many ways (Brown et al., 2018; Betts et al., 2019). Brown et al.'s (2018) study of urban refugee economies in Addis Ababa identifies five major development/economic contributions of urban refugees: Growing local markets and revenues as new arrivals become new clients for urban services, creation of new jobs and increase of human capital, discovery of new market opportunities and internationalisation of markets through remittances and cross-border trade. In other words, regardless of the multiple constraining factors, some refugees with entrepreneurial capacity can create jobs for themselves, contribute to the livelihoods of other refugees and even employ the locals. The case of Helen (Bint-AAU-MG-024-ETH), a female Tigrinya refugee in Shire, illustrates this: Helen's exceptional case shows the contribution of refugee entrepreneurs to the economy, including the creation of jobs.



### Box 7: A new street of coffee houses

*Helen is an Eritrean refugee in her twenties who lives in Shire as an urban refugee. She lives with her younger sister who followed her over the border after the Ethiopian–Eritrean peace deal in 2019. Both sisters grew up in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Their mother left them at an early age and went to the Middle East. Finally, their mother ended up in the United States, but she never really succeeded in finding a stable income and could not support the family back home. Consequently, Helen worked from an early age on in different jobs such as bartender or waitress. Reaching eleventh grade, she was sent to the obligatory Sawa military training and served as a soldier for two years. Due to this experience, she decided to flee Eritrea: “The options you have [in Eritrea] are that you should either be with the government or hide and live secretly [or] otherwise leave the country.”*

*After deciding to stay in Shire, while her friends left for Addis Ababa after some time in Hitsats, Helen thought of a business that did not require significant capital: She had the idea to make and sell coffee. She picked a location in a byway, in a guesthouse of a quiet neighbourhood where there was no business activity. Helen considered the place to be suitable for her business because it was close to a college and offered shade from the trees for some chairs and tables: “People do enjoy drinking coffee under trees. (...) [yet] they are usually disturbed by the sound of cars. People prefer silence.” She could draw on her experience from having worked in a hotel in Asmara and managed to get permission to sell coffee on the verandah by assuring the building’s owner, an Ethiopian businessman, that this would increase the number of customers to his guesthouse. Helen also managed to quickly overcome administrative hurdles: She convinced her landlord to be her guarantor, and she got a confirmation from city council officials that she was eligible for a business license.*

*With the little money she had, Helen bought the necessary materials and started making and selling coffee. Combining her previous experiences with a good eye for local demand, her business picked up rapidly. She did so well that the guest house owner lent her 60,000 birr (US \$2,000) to expand her business. Helen bought additional furniture and materials such as chairs, a stove, refrigerator, roti maker, mixer, coffee, sugar to extend the service by offering small snacks. She then rented the room on the ground floor of the guest house for 3,000 birr (US \$100) per month. Even though it is only two by three metres big, she also used it as a bedroom and kitchen. The increasing number of customers changed the byway into a lively street. Ten new coffee shops opened in the area. But despite the competition, her shop remains a favourite spot for having coffee. Three months after she had borrowed the money, she paid back half of her debt.*

*Within three more months, Helen had employed a local person and another refugee to help in the store, successfully promoted the guest house, had learnt how to produce soap, started selling it—and was about to open an indoors coffee shop next to a game centre. Seeing the benefit for the guest house and observing how she had turned the run-down street into a vivid recreational and commercial space, another Ethiopian businessman proposed a deal to Helen where he would pay the expenses and she would provide customers and service. She rejoiced: “People always think money solves all problems—but if you work well, chances come to you!” The profits will be split equally; The business partner will cover the rent, the necessary kitchen equipment and the furniture while Helen will run the daily business and supervise the staff she plans to hire. At the same time, the old shop will be run by her sister and Helen’s friend who had gone to Addis but returned after she could not make it there (Bint-AAU-MG-024-ETH).*

It is also a rare example of refugee–host solidarity and a business partnership initiated without the mediation of any NGO or government. It underlines the importance of refugee-to-refugee connections in creating livelihoods for those in protracted displacement. Finally, it shows the “place-making” impact that refugees’ coping strategies can have by changing the commercial, recreational and physical space they inhabit.

## Concluding remarks

In this section, we discussed opportunities created through economic interactions with and among refugees. Refugees and hosts have developed innovative businesses in the refugee-hosting regions of the country. This result contradicts the dominant discourse where refugees are portrayed as taking advantage of the hosts. Even though refugees still do not have a formal right to work, they play an active role in local economies in most camps and urban centres. In Afar, the refugee-initiated cotton joint venture not only showcases refugee–host solidarity but also serves as a base to learn from for future refugee integration. In Tigray, the presence of camps has changed the business and infrastructure landscape. In urban centres,

such as Shire and Addis Ababa, our study shows that refugees contribute in multiple ways to and often even boost local economies. Local networks between refugees and community members play an important role in creating and enhancing economic development opportunities.

### Key findings

- *The presence of camps and refugees as well as national and international humanitarian staff contributes to the development of the local economy and infrastructure improvement.*
- *Refugees often manage to circumvent the legal and administrative constraints successfully. They drive up the demand for urban services, bring in new skills and perspectives and support other refugees.*
- *Refugees create new jobs by contributing to innovative business ideas such as joint ventures that strongly benefit the local communities, changing the business landscape in the long-term.*

## 4. Cross-cutting findings and emerging trends

Most Eritrean refugees—in camps and urban settings—struggle to survive and lead a life much below the standard of their aspiration. In general, the resilience of Eritrean refugees varies depending on family size, age, health, socio-economic status and gender. This section analyses cross-cutting findings on (a) factors that contribute to vulnerabilities and resilience, (b) reasons behind different patterns of mobility, and (c) the impact of socio-cultural commonalities that shape relationships between displaced persons and host communities.

### 4.1. Gender, vulnerability and resilience

Studies of networks often are gender-neutral and thus fail to disaggregate men and women's networking strategies sufficiently (Ryan, 2009). Neither the academic analysis of situations of displacement, the planning of humanitarian responses nor the implementation of assistance programmes would be able to respond to the diverse needs of displaced persons if gender were not taken into account. Our research has shown that female social networks are often tied to family spheres with a small circle of dense bonds and trusted relationships. Their frequent dependence on their parents and their traditional subordination to their husbands are reasons for this. However, there are many Eritrean women who came to Ethiopia or embarked from Ethiopia to Europe via irregular routes of their own volition. Family networks may also extend beyond conjugal and nuclear family units and involve siblings, cousins and other relatives. Beyond these (wider) family networks, women establish connections through activities that are regarded as traditional female responsibilities: Market places, mill houses and religious ceremonies (like *mahbers*)<sup>19</sup> offer ample opportunities to establish a network of contacts with the host community. Mihret, an Eritrean refugee who lives in Hitsats refugee camp, established a friendship with a host community member that continues to the present and stresses the importance of “*coincidental acquaintances*”:

*Do you know how many people go to the [local] rural area to attend weddings of their [local] friends? They [the locals] also come to the camp. There is a good relationship [between them and us]” (Bint-AAU-MG-007-ETH).*

Hewan, a 51-year-old Eritrean refugee who has lived in Hitsats camp for the last six years, made friends among the host community quite by coincidence:

*“I have three friends [from the host community]. While passing by, they asked me for a drink of water. I invited them in. They accepted my offer. After they had washed their feet, we enjoyed coffee and lunch together. Then they left for their homes. Some other day, they brought me sorghum and other things. From that time onward, we continued and strengthened our friendships. I often go to their homes and visit them. They also do the same” (Bint-AAU-MG-005-ETH).*

Respondents emphasised that such localised networks generate emotional and material support. Hewan stated that her intimate friendship with the local people enabled her to get firewood for a better price.

Our research often showed that the longer female refugees remain in camps, the more connections they have developed with other refugees or local hosts. Long-term neighbourhood often sets the basis for intimate friendships. In contrast, their connectivity to the world outside the immediate camp or settlement environment is often the weaker the longer their immobility lasts. However, since they rely heavily on local networks during protracted displacement, while these women are more dependent on local networks, they are often better connected locally than men.

Refugees establish new translocal networks and seek to maintain relationships with their place of origin. Relationships may, however, change and even end over time. The economic stress of displacement and the nature of clandestine journeys affect social ties that had been strong before. Many of the stories gathered throughout our research are explicitly gendered. Countless single women, most of them mothers, are stranded with neither financial nor social support—their hopes of moving have diminished to none. They are in fact completely immobilised in situations of protracted vulnerability and precarity. Against the backdrop of Helen's seemingly contradicting story, this shows the role of the structural handicaps women have to cope with: In most cases, women entered the migration process in a dependent position. Even though all individual cases are diverse, they can be grouped into proto-typical cases: One group of stranded female refugees followed their husbands for family reunification. Individual interviews with single mothers indicated that they had fled Eritrea with their spouse but lost contact after the husband engaged in secondary migration—often intending to reach Europe. A second group had connections with their spouse but lost them after fleeing with

<sup>19</sup> A get-together among Orthodox Christians celebrated every year or it can be celebrated every month. During such events, people prepare feast and invite others. It plays a decisive role in creating harmonious social relations among members.

their children to Ethiopia. According to our survey, 38 per cent of female refugees left Eritrea on their own, and 30 per cent of Eritrean women who fled had been separated from family members. Some explained to us that their husbands used to be the key sources of support, advice and information behind their decision to migrate, but the majority of 78 per cent remarked in the survey that they did not have any support from anyone for their journey.

The ruptures that they encountered on the move put them in a particularly vulnerable position: Their psychological well-being had deteriorated, their financial resources depleted, and they did not see any prospect to cope with or improve their situation. In fact, we found that a disproportionate number of women were falling into a downward spiral of mutually exacerbating factors of social isolation, poverty, sickness, loneliness, depression and unemployment. Our survey also shows that only six per cent of female refugees have employment or informal work (compared to 11% of male Eritrean refugees). Women are thus more dependent on aid or other benefits from the state or humanitarian organisations. More female refugees are embedded in transnational social figurations than displaced men (41% compared to 30%). Three out of ten women compared to two out of ten men primarily rely on the money sent from their spouse or other relatives abroad for their living. Further analysis of our survey data will help to identify the extent to which protractedness, precarious living conditions and transnational dependencies are related to gender and (ruptures in) family relations.

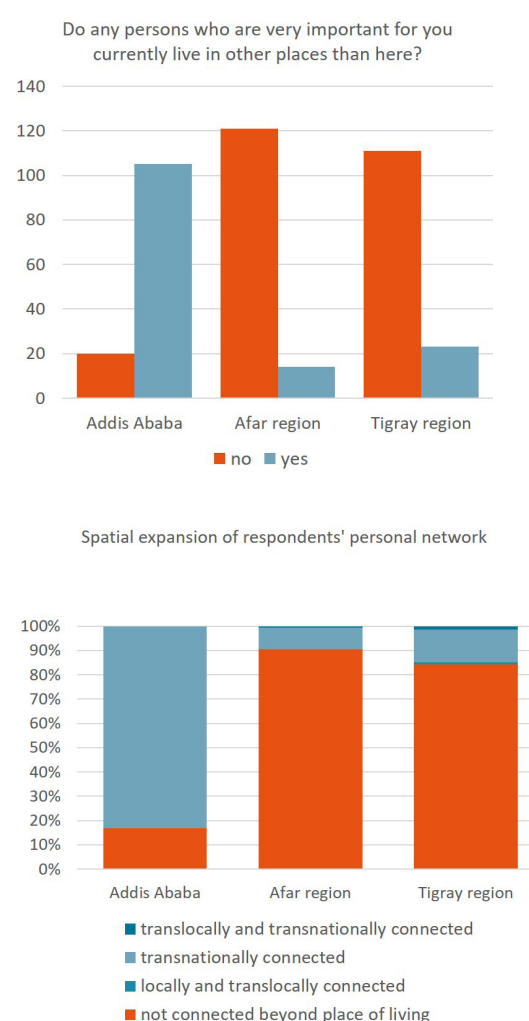
## 4.2. Short and long-distance trajectories

The Eritrean diasporic community is dominated by the Tigrinya ethnic group. The Afar and Kunama are known to have relatively limited transnational migration experience and a very small diaspora. Those who left first have had a clear influence on the question of whether refugees embark on short, medium, or long-distance trajectories. Trajectories change on the move and in time. This implies that more movements and being on the move longer often coincide with an enlarged horizon regarding the multiplicity of options. Recent changes in the pattern of and aspiration for movements among the Afar and Kunama have confirmed this. Some pioneers who had somewhat accidentally ended up in the United States or Canada spread the news—in person or via various information channels—about their experiences. Since then, UNHCR has reported a significant increase in Afar and Kunama refugees showing an interest in resettling in—preferably—these countries, or any other for that matter.

However, while expansive transnational networks are still rare (see the ‘Afar region’ in Figure 9), Afar and Kunama, whose transnational connectivity is weak, have strong local networks, and the solidarity from host communities is strong. The extent to which they benefit from local connectivity depends on the local political and economic resources. Local Afar networks

provided the refugees with productive resources such as access to land, jobs, etc., while the very significant minority Kunama was at least able to give the refugees access to sharecropping and emotional support. Camps inhabited by Kunama and Afar refugees are relatively stable in terms of population movement. Most of them flee to escape from the brutal Eritrean regime, and once they have arrived in the camps, they do not aspire to secondary migration, partly due to a lack of information, networks and financial means. Consequently, their chances to break free from external dependence and to end their protractedness are much smaller.

**Figure 9: Transnational connections of Eritrean refugees from three study regions**



Source: TRAFIG survey data, n=394

Tigrinya refugees, particularly those who have already made it to Addis Ababa, often have vast transnational networks with families and relatives scattered across multiple places (see Figure 9). They had been displaced at different times and fled to various locations within the last two decades or before. Communication apps such as Messenger, Facebook and IMO enable



them to remain connected with transnational family members<sup>20</sup>. Resources, as well as responsibilities, are frequently distributed among family members or households across these places. Displaced people's mobility is often situated in the logic of families and broader social networks and hinge on pre-existing and recently (continuously) formed patterns of connectivity. Yordanos' family network and connectivity (Box 5) scattered across multiple locations in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sweden, Switzerland and Canada is a case in point that shows how pathways form during movements and how aspirations are influenced by the examples of those on the move.

### 4.3. Belonging, suspicion and solidarity

In Afar, informants repeatedly emphasised that regardless of which country they live in, they are Afar—a factor that is crucial for the shape of the local refugee-host community. The commonalities in language, religion, and cultural practices are compounded by strong clan relationships in Afar's pastoral community. Zainab, an Afar from Eritrea, emotionally described this strong bond:

*We thank God since coming here. The community has treated us like brothers and sisters. They have not given us any trouble. I go to many places [within Afar] I go to get wood, and I never get any resistance from the local people. When we want to sell our products, they let us be and do not fight with us over territory. They are Afar like us, and we speak the same language. So we live peacefully (Sint-AAU-MG-034-ETH).*

In Tigray, the Tigriyna refugees focus on individual interactions and sometimes complain that Tigrayan officials and institutions are not as welcoming as individuals they interact with at the markets or religious locations. To the contrary, in Afar regional state, the Eritrean Afar refugees reported feeling at home, including administrative institutions. While tensions between the refugee and the hosting communities occur, there was no reported case of any of these tensions being grounded in generalised suspicions or reservations related to the status of being Eritrean Afar. In contrast to the intra-ethnic political animosities and ambivalent trust relations between Tigriyna speakers in Eritrea and Tigray, there is a high level of trust, cohesion and intra-ethnic solidarity between ethnic Afar from Eritrea, Ethiopia or Djibouti. In other words: While relations between Tigriyna speakers are varying in each individual case, Afar solidarity is a strict social obligation without alternatives and therefore virtually universal.

Another Afar, Mohammed, married with four children and working in a shared cotton farm close to Aysaita refugee camp, stressed how the belief that Afar in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti share a common culture shapes the attitude towards the refugees:

*In Afar, ever since before, the haves share with the have-nots. That is the culture. Even if we came here displaced, our language, religion and culture are the same. We do not have that many differences. We came here as a refugees, and they are the landowners. So, they gave us what they have, and we did what we can and decided to cooperate and share the profits (Sint-AAU-MG-040-ETH).*

The high level of solidarity is omnipresent in Afar. While the social obligation to share often means that more people have less (on average) for themselves, the mentioned cotton farm in Aysaita is a case in point for the potential of joining forces. They are not the only ones who benefit from the cooperation's entrepreneurship; the other host community members and fellow refugees do too. This includes female refugees who are usually mainly limited to making and selling traditional palm frond mats and those Afar refugees without registration staying in the camp (and who do not receive an official ration).

These cases show that a shared common language, culture and religion can contribute to peaceful coexistence. The relations between the Tigriyna from both sides of the borders does not disprove this. Instead, it sheds light on the role politics play in reshaping relationships regardless of commonalities

<sup>20</sup> Until the second half of 2019, before the Ethiopian government allowed for refugees to access telecommunications themselves, refugees organised telephone SIM cards through personal connections. Usually, refugees had to visit nearby towns to get access to the Internet from Internet cafes. Due to the high demand for communication the Internet café business also increased in these towns.

## Conclusion

In this *working paper*, we highlighted the role refugees' connectivity and mobility plays in refugees' everyday lives and as a solution to protracted displacement situations. Our empirical data comes from fieldwork in multiple refugee camps in northern and north-eastern Ethiopia and urban spaces. It clearly shows staggering differences between those who have networks and those who do not. Our results indicate that those who managed to leave Eritrea and transit camps to third-country destinations support family members and others in following their example, while those who had been stuck in the refugee camp for extended periods often had to cope with decreasing options of moving on. Both trends were found to reinforce themselves over time. The direction and options of movement—to another country and out of a refugee camp—and the time in displacement and the depth of protractedness directly depend on the extent and quality of a refugee's social network relations. Another significant result of the research is that unexpected ruptures that happen at different stages of refugees' mobility exacerbate refugees' vulnerability. The economic stress of displacement and the fragmented nature of clandestine journeys cause friction and vicious circles of debt and poverty that have a considerable impact on family and other social ties. Here again, women who have to take care of their children or aged or disabled kin are often more severely affected than others.

We have observed this difference not only between individuals but also between groups. Tigrinya groups with their long history of mobility have developed better transnational connectivity. This high level of connectivity is conducive to efforts to get out of situations of limbo in Ethiopia. Other groups, such as the Kunama or Afar, have not yet developed the same degree of transnational connectivity. Some of them spent nearly two decades in refugee camps in a stranded situation. Both groups did not aspire to resettle in the developed world or opt for secondary migration. According to official sources, many Kunama had previously been opposed to travelling to North America or Europe (Eint-BICC-MR-002-ETH). According to our findings, this was just due to a shortage of networks and lack of orientation towards international migration. This has recently changed: The first Kunama and Afar who profited from resettlement schemes have come back to tell their stories. As a result, the groups' attitude towards onward movements seems to change quickly. Recently, a group of Kunama secured resettlement to North America (Eint-BICC-MR-002-ETH).

## Onward movements

A refugee's networks and connectivity primarily determine their capability to move onward from life in a camp. For those who have a well-established network, camps are just a transit space where they process their onward mobility. Yet, those who do not have such high-quality connections (connectivity that brings information and resources to move on) suffer more from the effects of protracted displacement—and are more susceptible to experiencing intractable periods of waiting, diminished livelihood options and a generally increased vulnerability. Our research reveals that mobility and translocal connectivity need to be put in the context of previous histories of migration, bonds and alliances with the host communities, and finally, the state of current political affairs.

Furthermore, our research shows that displaced people depend on their connections to secure access to any kind of employment. This holds for contacts and information and for being able to move outside the camp—sponsored by family, friends and relatives in Eritrea, Ethiopia or the diaspora. Displaced persons find employment in locally owned businesses, such as garages, shops, factories, as hairdressers or waiters in cafeterias (cf. Brown et al., 2018). Opportunities for such jobs are higher in bigger cities such as Addis. Yet refugees access these jobs informally, and arrangements often involve risky behaviour and exploitation. The recent shift in the country's national refugee policy following the CRRF is likely to grant greater freedom of movement and work opportunities.

## Belonging and politics

Besides connectivity and mobility, there are two other issues that, according to our research, crucially shape the current situation and future prospects of refugees' integration: The question of belonging as illustrated by our analysis of the differences between Tigrinyas and Afar or Kunama, and the role of political factors as verified by the outbreak of the recent armed conflict in Tigray. None of these issues are directly related to national and international refugee policies. Yet, all have a decisive impact on refugees' everyday life and their broader 'transnational figuration of displacement'. While the position, perception and options that Eritreans have had in Tigray, Afar and Addis are determined largely by the perception, suspicions or obligations projected towards them by the locals, the current armed conflict in Tigray demonstrates the limits of any models of mobility or connectivity.

Given recent developments, the situation of Eritrean refugees has become more complicated. They find themselves increasingly trapped between a rock and a hard place. The area where the camps are located is a flashpoint of military conflict. According to reports from Eritrean refugees, the administration of the camps in Tigray collapsed after the fighting broke out. Camp officials fled, and food or aid supplies failed to arrive. As a particularly exposed and vulnerable group, Eritrean refugees sheltering in camps near the border are caught between all fronts. On the one hand, they fear that lines get blurred in the heat of the conflict, yet, on the other hand, they are afraid of the involvement of Eritrean forces, which would bring them in direct contact with the force they had fled from. Even before the conflict in Tigray broke out in late 2020, the refugees had become a pawn in political battles between the central and regional governments. This illustrates the dualism of refugee agency and political structures in protracted displacement situations described throughout the working paper: the figurations of displacement in and beyond Ethiopia are constantly transformed due to refugees' own actions and the networks that they spin to secure their lives, as well as wider political conflicts and shifting refugee policies.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ARRA</b>	Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs
<b>BICC</b>	Bonn International Center for Conversion
<b>CRRF</b>	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus
<b>EPLF</b>	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
<b>GCR</b>	Global Compact on Refugees
<b>IMO</b>	social messenger app
<b>JRS</b>	Jesuit Refugee Service
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>OAU</b>	Organization of African Unity
<b>OCP</b>	out-of-camp policy
<b>TPLF</b>	Tigray People's Liberation Front
<b>TRAFIG</b>	Transnational Figurations of Displacement (EU-funded research project)
<b>UAP</b>	urban assistance programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>US</b>	United States

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TRAFIG (Transnational Figurations of Displacement) is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 research and innovation project. From 2019 to 2021, 12 partner organisations investigate long-lasting displacement situations at multiple sites in Asia, Africa and Europe.

TRAFIG provides academic evidence on refugee movements and protracted displacement; analyses which conditions could help to improve displaced people's everyday lives and informs policymakers on how to develop solutions to protracted displacement.

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FIERI (Forum of International and European Research on Immigration), Italy

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